

Daybreak on Hyperion

Volume 1

Table of Contents

Daybreak on Hyperion Vol. 1

The Curse of Prodigy.

By the Runelord's Will

Master and Familiar

Regressions of Time

Status of Life

A Peaceful Day.

The Perfect Contrast

Inquisitive Hope

Bonds of Faith

Critical Appeal

For Weichsel, Not You

Better Late Than Never

Scarlet Cultural Exchange

Outbreak of War

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The Curse of Prodigy

Reynald could barely contain his excitement as he bounced down the granite steps, ahead of his two companions. "How could we not? With you reminding us every three minutes?" Parzifal sighed. Built with the lean musculature of a runner, his legs strode into the corridor with grace. "Only three from the entire school, and the whole campaign took just two weeks!" Reynald pumped his fist into the air as he spun for good measure. "Three out of four dozen." Parzifal's gaze at Reynald was stiff, but the younger redhead didn't even notice. Reynald had wanted to volunteer for the campaign himself, but Parzifal put his foot down as their group's leader. The redhead wouldn't hold it against him though. There were advantages to being a healer trainee, not to mention the sacrifices his family already

made for the Weichsel army. Parzifal clenched his jaw, but said nothing of it. Meanwhile Reynald proved as oblivious as usual when he romanticized battlefield heroes. "I heard about that too," added Ariadne as she walked besides Parzifal, her voice soft and her gaze worried about him. It threw the entire Northmen front into confusion just before the decisive charge hammered into their line. Marshal von Moltewitz gave him due credit of course, but also publicly reprimanded him for overriding command orders. "Great, leave it to the King to undo our Field Marshal's brilliance. It didn't take familiarity to spot Pascal. Even with eyes shut and arms crossed, he still sat with a regal poise that cleared all doubts. But that wasn't what naturally made him the center of attention. Meanwhile, over half the men scattered across the room, and quite a few women as well, looked toward him with scowling faces. It was an understatement to say that Pascal Kay Lennart von Moltewitz, the only heir of Field Marshal and Landgrave von Moltewitz of Nordkreuz, stood far above the crowd. But regardless of how assured he looked, no one could doubt the ill symptoms that too often followed any childhood prodigy:. The noble daughters that surrounded him whispered in hush voices, but Pascal's trained ears caught the words nonetheless. Pascal couldn't help but wish that one of those rumors was actually true, that Crown Princess Sylviane really did pay him a visit. Of course, not everyone spoke of his accomplishments with admiration. Contempt filled their voices as though ridiculing others somehow rescued their pride from the cowardice of doing nothing. No, he only cared enough to track those who foolishly marked themselves a foe. Their actual complaints were beneath him, unfit for extended consideration by even a single brain cell. Whining cowards and pining damsels, with the sheep-like idiocy of peasantry. At least those who joined had the valor to follow our aristocratic military heritage into war. The Kingdom of Weichsel prided itself on the competence of its military aristocracy. The Königsfeld Academy of Magic was among the best on the continent of Hyperion in the arts of administration, diplomacy, strategy, and of course, sorcery. Pascal knew perfectly well that he had a long way to climb before emerging from the shadows of his father's renown. The professor turned to prepare the classroom's illusion projectors. Whistling a short tune, he patiently waited for the students to empty their minds of burning curiosities so they may receive fresh wisdom. Silently, he scrolled back through his memories,

thinking of every mage's familiar he came across during his years. But then.. why must I be limited to mere beasts?. Pascal drew a scroll of parchment and copied down the mnemonic incantations of every core Summon Familiar spell variant he knew from memory. He didn't need a servant. A traditional, obedient familiar was no better than a yes-man. Images came of a twin who shared his outlook, and the mere prospect of mirrored words made his mind recoil. A brief flashback brought his thoughts back to his childhood, when he and Princess Sylviane could spend hours lounging on the shores of the Cross Lake near the von Moltewitz estate. "Captain Sir Pascal Kay Lennart von Moltewitz, as you are our honored 'hero' of the war, it is only fair that we begin today's lecture with your.. Rolling up his parchment as he stood, Pascal's determination revealed not the slightest sign of offense or hesitance. It would be many hours of late night studies before Pascal could finish the work he began. Beasts were simple-minded. It was easy to find a physically and mentally healthy critter to call forth as a familiar. Magical energy naturally diffused towards the nearest shortcut: twiddling with the first subject that met most criteria instead of seeking a perfect match. Of course, shaping minds was a difficult and dangerous business, but molding forms through sorcery could easily be achieved.

By the Runelord's Will

"Remarkable, Miss von Zimmer-Manteuffel! You've clearly bested all three of your older brothers in the family tradition." Professor Albert von Marienfeld's awed words mirrored his gleaming-onyx eyes as they examined the beautiful wings of Ariadne's flawless white pegasus. "Between such potential and your top-ranking grades, I'm sure the Knights Phantom eagerly await the day of your graduation!". "Thank you, Professor Sir," Ariadne returned a courteous reply as she stood up and brushed back her silken pink cascade. Pleased with her own summoning, she finally let go of the breath she'd been unconsciously holding. Professor Albert -- since his cousin of the same surname also taught within the academy -- looked around to survey all the familiars. Then, spotting the lone individual that stood by the windows, Albert just barely caught himself from swearing:. "Sir von Moltewitz, my apologies. I almost forgot you had offered to go last.". I am the one who disrupted the order," Pascal

remarked with nonchalance as he strode to the one remaining clearing within the Cancellation Field that opened a gap in the castle's Lockdown anti-teleportation ward. "I did not wish to cause an interruption when something unusual happened, since it is my first time accomplishing this." Professor Albert took care to suppress his eager curiosity, mostly because he agreed with the other students over Pascal's motivations, at least in part. After carefully positioning sixteen of them, Pascal connected the rocks with series of tiny malachite gems to form a perfect circle. "Amazing..." came a feminine murmur as others nodded in consent. "I believe you and Professor von Kirchner are the only two experts of ancient Runic Rituals on campus, and I'm not quite a specialist on gem magic," Professor Albert commented. "So would you please explain your setup to everyone?". "Of course." Pascal relished in the opportunity. "As you know, Runic Magic was created by the Northmen to reduce the casting time of their battle magic. "As expected, you've put plenty of thought into preparing this," the Professor commented. "With the runes handling everything, the ritual itself is quite simple and leaves no chance for errors," Pascal began with assured confidence as he gently cut his right index finger with a dagger. Carefully aiming, he dripped a drop of fresh blood into the top rune of the inner ring. The focus stones and precious gems had been reduced to a ring of worthless gray dust. Professor Albert kept his cool, but he was willing to bet his life that Pascal was somehow involved in this unnatural conclusion to a sacred rite of magecraft. In hindsight, he should have expected something like this, when Pascal was not only using magic beyond the supervisor's expertise but also showing off. But Pascal himself paid no heed. His eyes were transfixed upon the unconscious girl. At barely one-fifty-seven centimeters (5'2") tall, the thin girl appeared no older than her mid-teens and gave off a fragile, almost doll-like appearance. She had an adorably tiny nose and thinly curled lashes, while straight cream-white hair ran all the way down to her thighs. "Did he.. just summon a Samaran girl for a familiar?". "But why a Samaran? Not only are they commoners.. Republicans," Reynald spat out the word as though it was filthy, "but they're also nonbelieving heathens.". The retired general was not used to being ignored, even by this young upstart. "It is exactly what it looks like, Professor Sir," Pascal replied while picking up the unconscious girl in a cradling carry, his arms supporting her back and underneath her knees. "I

decided to summon an actual, intelligent person, and now the ritual has already been completed." By the time Pascal reached his dorm room, the adrenaline from his excitement was beginning to wear off, quickly giving way to the feeling of exhaustion. With a swift gesture, his Unlock cantrip was recognized by the door's magical enhancement, and he carried the still-unconscious girl across the threshold into his room. It was officially a 'dorm', but in a school built for nobles, the spacious bedroom was larger and better-furnished than tavern guest rooms. After gently laying her across his bed, Pascal went through his drawers to find some more appropriate clothes. Pascal was bent over the summoned girl, now naked on his four-poster bed with her baggy clothes tossed onto the floor. Meanwhile, his hands were in the midst of pulling lingerie up her thighs. He avoided Pascal for several days after that. Kaede had never felt this tired after waking up from a nap. It took exertion just to push against the bedcovers, with barely a sliver of his usual strength. Wait a sec.. when did I fall asleep?. It had been a tiring week. Kaede had been a member of his high school's athletics festival planning committee, and this year the timing overlapped with an archery tournament that he would be attending. It didn't help that his sister's family had fallen sick, prompting his Japanese mother to fly to Vladivostok to care for them. The fear that he had overslept lit up his mind in a flash. He felt his pulse quickening as uncertainty washed over him. Sitting up on the bed to get a better view, he suddenly realized that his back and shoulders were bared and chilly. By contrast, his chest was covered by a fabric smoother than anything he was used to. Wait.. something's not right... He looked down, first noticing that his arms were one: far thinner than they should be, and two: wearing silky white gloves.. Then his downward tracing eyes saw 'his' chest, and his mind promptly blanked out as every thought came to a crashing halt. His senses and mental capacities had to be rebooted one by one as a result.

Realization #1: He, or perhaps she was a better descriptor of this body, had small mounds of outward bulging flesh on the chest that could only be described as breasts. Petite but so very soft and sensitive, if his..

Realization #2: She was wearing a pure white halter top of.. Okay, deep breaths.. calm down and think. Unfortunately, after two mental shocks and still no moment of startled awakening, Kaede concluded that this was probably not just a weird dream.. Pulling her legs out of the bed, Kaede

noticed that the charmeuse halter top went down to form a single, seamless piece with both her underwear and the semi-translucent skirt covering it. Two garter straps also held up thigh-high socks, or more like solid white stockings. With her feet on the carpet, she tried to stand up, only to sway once before collapsing back into the bed. This much effort just to stand and walk.. Taking each step with care, Kaede gradually made her way over to the chair where her blue windbreaker jacket was draped over. She also recognized the bag containing her greatbow leaning against a nearby table, and mentally filed the information away for later. Kaede was self-taught in both eastern and western swordsmanship, so he could effectively use any stick of reasonable length. Her first warm-up swing almost sent her crashing into a long dressing table. Hearing faint but rushed footsteps beyond the door, Kaede rushed to take cover behind a protruding wall corner near the doorway. Stepping out from behind the corner, she swung the iron poker with a two-handed grip, its metal spike facing forward. With her weak arms, she knew that maximizing damage on the initial hit was her only chance of winning. Carrying a tray filled with sandwiches and a bowl of steaming hot soup, the intruder reflexively lurched the tray forward to use as a shield. Her painful yell muffled the young man's clenched grunt. Tossing the tray towards his left, he used its edge to catch the spike and disarmed her of the poker. With a deep sigh, the young man waved his hand again and the searing liquid disappeared. Still breathing hard, Kaede rolled onto her back, glaring at her foe through tear-stained eyes even as her thoughts slowly returned. One-eighty-two (6'0") with broad shoulders accentuated by his stiff crimson-on-black uniform, the man turned to sit down on the four-poster bed while keeping her within his glance. Turning towards his bloodied hand, he took out a small pebble and pressed it into his left palm. "Please do not attempt anything so stupid again. I am an experienced soldier and I really do not want to be forced to hurt you. Still glaring with angry eyes, Kaede took a brief moment before nodding in consent. Kaede quickly brought her hands forward, rubbing her chest just above the breasts in an attempt to ease the lingering pain. Surprisingly, there was no longer a single spot of stain on the pure white fabric. "Here, Invigorate," he reached forward with the glowing ring, hovering just beyond her chest without touching. "Surface wounds are easy. Just sleep on it and you will not even notice it by

morning.". "On to introductions: my name is Pascal Kay Lennart von Moltewitz, son of Weichsel Field Marshal von Moltewitz, heir to the Landgrave of Nordkreuz. "My surname is Russian! I'm half-Russian and half-Japanese," she countered while sitting back up into a formal Japanese kneel, shifting uncomfortably as she felt her cold, satin-covered heels press against her bottom. "People from the northeastern Grand Republic of Samara, usually pale with silver-blue to light-blond hair; social egalitarians who worship the sky-god and believe in spiritual reincarnation." Pascal explained in an irritatingly aristocratic, drawling accent. Then, with a confused look that he wasn't used to: "I have never heard of Russian or Japanese before.". "We are in the Königsfeld Academy of Magic, forty-nine kilopaces outside Königsfeld itself, Capital of the Kingdom of Weichsel. Well.. Kaede only knew 'Samara' as a Russian city and region, and the other names mostly sounded either Germanic or Scandinavian, except the continent name, which matched Greek mythology. But it didn't take a linguist to realize that all those foreign nation-states, not to mention the keywords Academy of Magic, meant only one thing:. "Of course not. The ground is three levels below." His left eyebrow arched upwards in curiosity. this is just.. how did this even happen?". "I summoned you to be my familiar. Kaede stood back up in a flash and almost fell over again. "--Or.. I guess asking for someone with a 'whole different world outlook' bought me more than I bargained for.". "Why the heck did you summon me?" Her arms flailed dramatically. "The spell picked you, not me.. His ring finally stopped glowing, and he stretched out his left hand, whole again without a single scratch. With his eyes examining the healed result, he answered with a tone of uncaring nonchalance:. Familiar contracts are not meant to ever be broken. Familiars also rarely live long after the master's death, so even if I can sever it, you are likely to die in the process.". "And if the summoning spell really did transform your physical body, that means it also materialized -- or better said, naturalized -- you for our world. That means I cannot just banish you back to wherever you came from. "There is no need for such tasteless measures," he simply shrugged. "I am not one of those commoners who needs their ego constantly stroked.". That is clearly. "I believe this is quite a fair deal. Be my companion, and I will make certain you are well taken care of and live a comfortable life.". "--And you will have just as good of a life here. "--And a cute ass it is. I would not really mind."

Pascal chuckled as he eyed the semi-translucent skirt poking out from underneath her jacket. it appears I forgot to prepare you a new bed. So just sleep in mine for tonight, and I will have that fixed as soon as I can.". I am NOT sleeping next to a man who put me in bridal lingerie! Kaede's mind shouted. "You can't seriously be expecting me to.. "Do not worry. A proper nobleman like myself would never do anything without consent, especially not to a sleeping lady." His reassurance proved anything but reassuring as he finished unbuttoning his undershirt, revealing the chiseled muscles beneath. "Of course. Your jacket and trousers were dirty.". "That's not the point! Do.. DON'T YOU HAVE ANY COMMON SENSE!!".

Master and Familiar

True to his word, Pascal kept his hands to himself that night. On the first night of Kaede's new life, she silently cried herself to sleep.. By the time the first rays of light cracked through the curtains, she was tired of lying about. Königsfeld Academy's 'dormitory' turned out to be more of an opulently furnished keep. She had left behind her sweatpants, as their now-oversized waist refused to stay up. no, more like an indigo planet floating just beyond the horizon. The cotton clouds, even bathed by the orange light of daybreak, betrayed a tinge of blue. Surveying the surroundings, Kaede realized that the dormitory was but one of many stone keeps in a massive fortress complex. The entire fortification stood amidst a vast, flat countryside dotted by patches of woods and clustered farmhouses. Japanese archery, known as Kyudo, sought moral and spiritual enhancement alongside marksmanship improvement. For Kaede's often-bloated thoughts, it was a hobby that brought her inner peace and serenity. The leather glove proved as ill-fitting as her jacket, but Kaede paid it no heed as she slowly transitioned from loading into the firing stance, drawing the arrow back as she went. Her weak hand shook as she strained her meager strength to pull back the bowstring. "You are my familiar, remember?" came Pascal's response, clear and revitalized. "Well, shared sensory perception for starters," he began. "I can tap your senses -- visual, audio, and empathic. "Wait," Kaede finally pulled out of her stance and turned to face him. "Not yet. That one is a passive link, so it takes longer to connect.". Standing proudly in his immaculate crimson-on-black military uniform, Pascal wore his black Knight's Cross medal under the stiff folded

collars that held his silver insignias. With a thoughtful smile, his clear aqua-blue eyes shone with admiring intrigue before changing into one of concerned examination. "Gee, thanks. I wonder whose fault it is," she retorted. With a few muttered words, Pascal slowly waved his right hand across Kaede's face. "I mostly use this in the field," he explained in rather stiff words. "Officers must always look awake and confident, even if they only caught three hours of sleep. "Yes, of course." Kaede was feeling unusually sarcastic this morning. "Can't let your mistress play-toy look ashen-faced with bloodshot eyes, can we?". "While I recognize that many nobles have a taste for that, I have no such need. "As I was saying, a familiar also serves as an eldritch proxy for the master. "Terrific, so I'm a water hose now," her response was deadpan. Then more seriously: "Does that at least mean I can learn to cast spells using your ether.. "Mana is freely available spiritual power, scattered into the environment by all living beings. Pascal suddenly stopped. His eyes refocused on Kaede with its piercing turquoise gaze, and his voice resounded from within her own mind:. "You can use this also. "No, only the thoughts you will to others are sent through the channel," he spoke with utmost sincerity. "While the summoning compels the familiar to go through the ceremony, familiar bonds do not rely on compulsion magic. "Alright," Kaede relaxed, suppressing the urge to poke out those increasingly downcast eyes. "So that's how I can understand you. "Because I inserted two additional functions into the bond." Pascal took the credit with majestic pride, his irritatingly aristocrat drawl returning. Good thing too, because otherwise you would only be able to talk to me.". Despite his attitude, for the first time Kaede felt glad about something Pascal did. "I am getting there.. Since I am born of high nobility, we can never know if there may be treachery underfoot. After setting her bow down in a rush, Kaede quickly stripped the white satin glove off her right arm. "I'm not a battery!" She stared back at him with incensed eyes. "Of course not. I would never ask you to serve for artillery," he replied with slight confusion. "No, I meant.. a battery is a device for storing electricity, lightning-power, from my world.". "Indeed," he nodded with interest. "Well, being a user of both gem and runic magic, reserve capacity is not one of my problems. After suppressing all her irritation, frustration, and anger for so long, Kaede's taut emotional strings finally snapped. She stabbed two of her fingers into the runes and

activated the entire set on her right arm. Although there was no visual cue, Kaede could feel her skin hardening. Best of all, her strength not only returned to that of her former self, but multiplied yet further. Her smile concealed a gleaming dagger as she bridged the gap between them with one stride. Lowering her mass into a fighting stance, she sent her right fist straight into his stomach. Coughing blood into the air, Pascal reached out with both hands, fingers extended. Four pebble-sized runes appeared out of thin air in between the fingers of each glove. With her initial surprise and momentum wearing off, Pascal soon began to block her attacks and even occasionally attempt to counter. The one-sided beatdown lasted just over a minute, and Kaede only halted after Pascal stopped struggling. "Wha'.. wahe 'at.. "You!.. You pulled me out of a perfectly good life, forced me to abandon my family and friends, cut short all my effort and dreams, took away everything I know, dragged me into this fucking world, turned me into a girl out of your selfish whims, destroyed any hopes of me ever going back, treat my entire existence like property, and, and, AND YOU DON'T EVEN THINK YOU DESERVE A BEATING!!!?". Having drained her of what little energy she had, Kaede's violent outburst had opened up the floodgates. Lying parallel to him and on her side, she curled up her legs and began to wail and sob uncontrollably. "I fink 'ou brog 'wo 'oohe," he managed to gurgle out from his bloody mouth. Turning to his other side, Pascal finally spat out the remaining bloody mess in his mouth. Rune-engraved stones flew out of a belt pouch too small to hold them all and formed a large ring around them. Too tired to worry or even contemplate for once, Kaede simply sat there, dazed. "No meals for you today," Pascal answered, more irritated than angry, before glancing at Kaede and eyeing her cross-legged sitting posture. Sure, starving through the day would just increase her misery. But as much as Kaede hated the thought, she didn't want to be 'disowned'. Worse yet, Pascal was the son of a high noble and an important official of the state.

The air between them stayed silent and awkward. The healing left him fully functional, but sore and aching all over. Part of her was relieved. Most of her thought it was a shame. But what really bothered Kaede was why Pascal kept everything bottled, instead of lashing out her way. Now, as he went through the room in search of something, she felt like she had to

say something. In hindsight, beating him to an inch of his life really was too extreme. It didn't mean she hated it any less, or blamed him any less for it. Her voice was mostly nervous, partly regretful, and more than a hint begrudging. That was the most she was willing to concede. Wordlessly, Pascal strode over to a large wardrobe.

For obvious reasons, Kaede was not used to wearing heels, not even five-centimeter-tall (2") chunky heels with ankle straps. Located on the first floor of the massive central keep, the dining hall was large enough to fit a small church. Lit by chandeliers and massive stained-glass windows, it was lined with long dining tables. "Hey Runelord," a jeering call came from the far side as a short boy with flaming-red hair stood up. "Just ignore them. Mere blithering idiots unworthy of our time," Pascal's stiff voice resounded within her head. Walking ahead, Pascal never turned back towards her once, and Kaede had a sneaking suspicion that the emotional link he mentioned earlier was starting to work -- possibly a result of her recent outburst. Heat rushed up her cheeks as her realization enhanced her embarrassment with another magnitude of annoyance and discontent. She followed Pascal to a relatively isolated part of the hall and took a seat next to him. "Gee, thanks. How generous of you, Sir!". Just please, the next time you feel overwhelmed, speak to me with words instead of with your fists. I assure you that next time I will not be caught so unprepared by barbaric violence.". Kaede looked back down. Relief washed over her, only to be joined by a sense of shame that she had to rely on someone else, that she had to be taken care of at all in this new world. When her eyes returned, she found Pascal scowling. Her clear, bright-cyan eyes seemed to sparkle above the naturally sweet and gentle smile of her cherry lips. Her slender body was athletic yet wrapped by enticing curves, striding forth with firm and elegant steps. The hall seemed to hush as she walked up to a stop directly behind Pascal. My name is Ariadne Charlotte von Zimmer-Manteuffel, daughter to the Margrave of Saale-Holzland. I apologize for the impropriety, but the last time we met, you were still unconscious.". Kaede was stunned by the presence of true nobility and grace. "I'm Kaede Nika Suvorsky. I'm honored to meet you, uh, milady.". "I apologize for being direct, but hearsay has already circulated the school, and I would like to ask the person in question. Are you, per chance, from the Grand Republic of

Samara?". Not at all. it would be accurate to say that I'm not of this world at all, and none of the countries I know exist here.". Even with her shocked expression, Ariadne's gentle smile did not falter. But her hesitant tone did betray the strand of disbelief that tugged at her sincerity. must be really hard on you. If you need help with anything, please do not hesitate to ask me. "I must admit that I saw you two on the roof this morning during my ride. As if on cue, her stomach chimed in with another growl. But he continued to face forward, staring at thin air with a clearly disgruntled look. "Not at all. Well then, good luck, have a pleasant day, and I will see you around!". Ariadne turned back around and strode off, while the hall seemed to burst back into chatter. Pascal however, didn't even acknowledge the maid as she served him his food. "Finish swallowing your food before you speak," Pascal sent her a glance. Kaede shut her legs instantly, her face glowing with part-embarrassment and part-anger. If she didn't have another forked sausage in hand, she might have hit him. "And with Ariadne.. well, I would be lying to myself if I just shrugged her off as another idiot. "I courted Ariadne once, back during our first year here. She couldn't stop complaining about every little detail about her performance that bothered her back then. "Well.. you kinda--". But no words left him at all. Pascal kept on eating as if she had never said anything. She turned out to be a beautiful and caring girl, an excellent mage, and a fine example of nobility. She would have made a great friend, if not at least an excellent political ally. Contemplative, Kaede thought back to some of the less-than-stellar people choices she made during her own years. It certainly could have been far worse. At least Pascal seemed to have some half-decency. With his meal finished, Pascal carefully wiped his mouth with the napkin before pulling out his chair and standing up. You can learn more about this world and help me with my research there.".

Regressions of Time

Following behind Pascal, Kaede balanced four massive tomes in her small hands. Her body was also bothering her with another pressure.. and it was becoming harder to ignore by the second. "W-wait!" she called out, her breath already starting to fall short. Already ten paces ahead, Pascal sent a backwards glance. Sighing, he swiveled around, marched right up to her, and pulled all four tomes out of her hands. "Come on." he started

walking towards the dormitories again, his pace slower with books in hand. "History is the foundation of all culture and geopolitical relations. It's so much more than just a timeline of events and people. "Seriously, it's annoying how most schools treat something so important as just a bunch of dates, names, and all those useless details. It makes people lose respect for history." Kaede launched straight into an impromptu rant. Now really short of breath, Kaede finally noticed that Pascal was examining her with an odd expression: lopsided smile, single raised eyebrow, and amusement dancing in his eyes. "History professor or scholar?" he asked. "I wanted to be," she replied in a low, somber whisper filled with nostalgia. "How is a game supposed to teach history?" Pascal was growing more and more intrigued as he turned into one of the dormitory keep's spiraling tower staircases. Of course, it's far simpler than the real thing and made to entertain by stimulating people's need for an intellectual challenge. Movies are similar, except instead of being a simulation, it merely shows a recording of actors portraying a scripted story." "It's called 'standardized education'," Kaede spoke the term with pride. "A fine system for any meritocracy. We will have to discuss the idea with father at some point," Pascal concluded. "No, there is an ether identifier installed on the lock," he said while placing the tomes onto a nearby table. Another wave, wordlessly this time, and the crystal orb mounted on the ceiling filled the room with bright light. I will make you a ring with the Unlock cantrip later tonight, and you should be able to use my ether to open the door. But come now, we are late for dinner." "W-wait!" she called out as he started to leave. The pressure below her waist was beginning to push her limits, forcing distress to overcome her embarrassment. "Oh." Pascal closed the door again. He moved to a corner and pulled open a small closet, then took out something large, heavy, and porcelain before setting it down on the carpet. "What.. are you doing?". "What does it look like I'm doing?" She snapped back. "Now would you leave the room? Or are you that anxious to watch a girl take a piss?". Eyes widening and face reddening, Pascal spun around and rushed towards the door. Unfortunately, Pascal had never slept in the same bedroom or even the same suite as another person before.

"Oh Holy Father, we thank you for your blessings in this wonderful meal and the bountiful harvest this year, and we praise you for your grace

in the swift victories that returned peace to our fatherland. May your light of guidance continue to show us the path of the devoted, the faithful, and the righteous. Once again, Kaede was sitting next to Pascal near a corner of the dining hall, isolated from everyone else. Another group that occupied the adjacent table did exactly the same. Based on the words that drifted through the air, Kaede had the distinct feeling that these were Pascal's admiring 'fans'. Unfortunately, many of them were also taking some verbal jabs at her:. Pascal and Kaede had arrived just in time for prayers, but their dinner -- which the chefs prepared based on the day's theme and each student's known preferences -- had yet to be delivered. With nothing to do and already becoming a target for 'female politics', Kaede's discomfort was steadily growing into annoyance again. "They are vultures who console themselves with the failure of others. If they have a problem with you sitting here, they can take it up with me.". On one hand, Kaede felt assured by his words. On the other, she wasn't about to forget that this was all his fault, in multiple ways. "I told most of them I was not interested in the relationship they sought. "Pascal the lady-killer, court him one week and he'll give you his everlasting gift.. No wonder why everyone is keeping their distance. Actually, it's surprising there are still girls who like this guy. Kaede didn't think she would ever understand the 'bad boy appeal'.. "By the way.. you did not actually pray to the Holy Father, did you?". Pascal's interrogation hit her spot on just as two servants brought in their meals. Kaede had pretended to pray to show respect, but reciting words that she didn't believe in seemed.. Having spent a dozen years in Central Russia, Kaede did attend several Eastern Orthodox services, but she never really converted and stayed an agnostic-deist like her mother. Plus, she considered her religious flexibility to be a major advantage when studying foreign history and culture, so when it came to the religiously adamant... "Hey, I already follow the Flying Spaghetti God, so please respect my faith," Kaede retorted. "Honestly, I do not care what deity you worship. Who knows if your world even lies within the same divine jurisdiction. Resounding deep into her mind, his voice was as adamant as polished steel. She wasn't complaining. The meal was not exactly modern, but it still tasted like bliss. Pascal spent most of dinner asking Kaede about her limited martial arts background, her archery practice in the morning, and

the role they played in her home world. "Of course! Not that I have to try, with you being a scholar of history.

Leaning back against the plush chair in front of his table, Pascal casually juggled multiple sorceries at once. "...And that is how she came to be. I cannot wait to show her to you over the holidays, Sylv. "Indeed, and by complete accident. I did not even know summoning could work that way!". "You know, Pascal, when I allowed you to have dalliances during your academy years, I do not remember giving you the permission to bind another girl with a contract of 'till death do us part', officially no less. Our betrothal may be political, but it is still a committed one.". Until then, Pascal hadn't even considered summoning a familiar to have any relation to betrayal. "The next few weeks are about to get busy for me, with all the trouble brewing in the south. He had been so caught up telling Sylviane his story that he hadn't asked about her problems. Neither Sylviane nor her father Geoffroi the Great had any tendency to start diplomatic squabbles over personal grudges. But if Sylviane found her royal honor insulted, she might break tradition. He turned to look at Kaede, who sat in his bed with her stockinged legs tucked in. Her breakdown this morning was still fresh on his mind. He spent much of the morning being annoyed at himself as a result. "So.. when am I getting my bed?" Kaede chimed in, finally breaking the silence. "Go to sleep," he ordered, before dimming the ceiling light to a faint glow with a wave of his hand. Swinging open the door, he looked back to Kaede and felt her glaring at him from the shadows.

Status of Life

Even on a Sunday, Ariadne's morning began at 6AM. Taking advantage of a fresh mind, she always started with an hour of studying. After that was a full set of warm-ups, from squats to sit-ups, while she watched the dawning light permeate the horizon in grapefruit red. It was followed by an hour of sword practice, slashing away at illusory opponents provided by the academy's drill hall. Manteuffel clan swords were heavy and difficult to handle. Though longer than a bastard sword, their blades were narrower and thicker. Ariadne was the fourth child in a branch family, the only daughter behind three older brothers. Soaring across the castle perimeter from ten stories up, she noticed another girl practicing early in

the morning. "Good morning, Miss Suvorsky!" Ariadne called out as she guided Edelweiss into a flawless landing atop the dormitory keep. Ariadne tested the waters, still not entirely believing the 'otherworld' story. But Kaede dispelled Ariadne's lingering suspicions in an instant as her pensive mood cast a gloom over her entire figure:. I practiced with it on most mornings back in my world. It's a meditative activity, and keeping up the routine helps when everything else has changed so much.". "I have a sturdy roof to live under, hearty food to enjoy, and a comfy bed to sleep in. The summoning is his fault, sure, but I can't do anything about what's already done. He acts like he's the crown prince or something, that anyone who isn't a superior must come under his unrelenting judgment and degradation. He's so condescending that he doesn't even respect most nobles like people, and outright ignores commoners.". It might amaze others that such bitter words could emerge from a sunny smile. Ariadne shrugged off her rising disappointment. Don't be greedy, she silently scolded herself. If there was one thing Ariadne enjoyed more than riding, and wanted more than a renowned career in the Knights Phantom, it was the trust, recognition, and admiration of everyone around her. This went doubly so for the closest person to one of her few enemies -- those who had dared to scorn her. Her beloved Parzifal once joked, amicably of course, that 'vanity' should have been her middle name. "To nobility, decadence is an expression of prestige, and as for liberal.. Weichsel does pride itself for being one of the most forward-thinking of the Hyperion nations. "Is there anything you need? Like I mentioned before, don't hesitate to ask. "Well.. Pascal's clothes for me are all dresses. "Trousers for women are only worn as a part of military uniforms," Ariadne's answer came straightforward. "In our world, it's proper modesty for a girl to keep both legs fully covered. She still didn't believe that another realm, without the aid of magic, could advance to a more technological level of civilization. But Samarans merely looked human and held unfair advantages: longevity rivaling the healthiest mages, and memories of 'past lives'..

"You can read those tomes on your time all you want," he explained after sitting her down at a table with both ends piled high with books. "But while the sun is still up, you are going to help me research for this.". "Victory through ordered chaos and destruction of organizational,

logistical, and political assets to inflict total system paralysis - Pandemonium Doctrine," Kaede read, before quickly scanning through the rest of the perfect-graded research proposal. Blitzkrieg...? Not quite; this sounds more like something from the Eurasian Steppes. "You're writing a new military doctrine?" She asked, her mind barely grasping the reality of the parchment in her hands. "But I need as many field examples as possible. Since you are into reading all those boring history books, finding the right battle records for me to examine will be your task!". Kaede didn't mind studying. But sweeping across the table with dozens of dusty tomes piled in thick columns, her eyes were beginning to feel tired already.

With balding gray hair above onyx eyes as sharp as an eagle's, he had an imposing set of well-trimmed long mustaches. His build was lean with just a bit of belly, his thick arms a remnant of wrestling days long passed. He also glanced over Kaede with just one look and never bothered to introduce himself. Which brought them all to this room, as large as the White House's Oval Office and furnished similarly: massive office table backed against huge windows, with intricate chairs and comfy couches atop rich rugs that covered the room's center. The hour was dusk, and the entire office was currently bathed in sunset orange. Not satisfied with his face being shadowed by the light from the windows, the headmaster also wore a bucket helmet on top of his gray robes. His outfit exposed not a patch of skin; even his hands were covered by black gloves. "There is a first time for everything, Sir." Pascal reported back in military posture: hands back and chest high. "Right you are. However, I hope you planned to face the same scrutiny and examination that they did.". "I understand, Sir. But I can do that myself." His tone was on the verge of protesting. You are neither a citizen of this country nor a holder of lawfully issued identification. You are not property, but due to the lack of legal precedence, you are not far above it, either.". Kaede felt like a trap door just opened below her. Her mind stopped all thinking as an impenetrable horror overwhelmed it. "As for you, Sir von Moltewitz, the answer is no. "I neither need nor care for academic recognition for this, Sir. In fact, I invoke my rights as a feudal noble to assert that she is my right and responsibility, Sir!". For a minute, all signs of passing time stopped as the room froze in the wake of his challenge. Then, it was Professor Albert who cleared his

throat from a rear corner of the room:. "Sir von Moltewitz, I suggest you reconsider. As you are still, in the eyes of the law, one year short of maturity, any repercussions for your actions will therefore fall under the responsibility of your father the Landgrave.". But I must also take responsibility for my ward, to my ward, for what I have done to her."

Pascal's unwavering tone snapped Kaede out of her daze, now staring at him with a gaping expression plastered on. "Having witnessed the procedures allowed on prisoners-of-war, I cannot allow the same to be forced upon her in good conscience!". After being raised from the depths of despair, Kaede suddenly felt her sight becoming glassy and her emotions stirred. Sure, it was completely his fault that she was stuck in such a situation in the first place. "With your permission, Sir, I would like to advise Sir von Moltewitz in performing the proper checks to ensure that no disaster befall us. I shall also shoulder any responsibility from his errors under my oversight.". Silence fell upon the room again, and Kaede could almost feel the shifting air pressure as two invisible forces dueled one another for supremacy. In the end, it was the headmaster who gave in first:. "Very well," he finalized in his raspy voice. "See to it that history does not repeat itself.". "Sir, this is the first time you have supported an independent action of mine in.. "See, if you had done your research in human-to-human binding, you would have known that there is an unspoken taboo on pact magic between Hyperiens and Samarans," began the Professor. The pandemic spread from mage to mage by mere proximity of spell auras, and killed a third of the noblemen across Hyperion before a cure was developed.". "No sweeping plagues have shown themselves for four centuries, so that one precedence must have been an act of God or freak occurrence. Remember to do your homework thoroughly next time so you don't give someone else the opportunity to interfere.". "Yes Sir. Thank you, Sir." Pascal answered, followed by a still-overwhelmed Kaede mirroring his gratitude. The professor, however, never so much looked at her. After a nod of acknowledgment to Pascal, he walked off:. "I expect your preliminary report by tomorrow morning, Sir von Moltewitz. Assume nothing, confirm! And don't forget your first research project checkpoint next Friday!".

I have met him quite a few times.. for various things." Pascal didn't seem interested in explaining. "Headmaster Sir von Bloomberg has not shown his face in years. "Still.. uh, Pascal?". "Thank you for what you did. Kaede was surprised Pascal managed to say that with a straight face. "Don't get full of yourself either. Your help is still a long way from canceling out your misdeeds.". Gently taking her left hand and folding back her sleeve, he raised what looked like a small syringe before readying it against her skin. The needle entered her arm with a sting, and he soon began to draw blood from her. "It means that you really are Samaran, or at least your body is. After laying the syringe on a bedside table, Pascal leaned forward and clasped Kaede on both shoulders. "The Samarans believe in reincarnation, born in this life after their last passed away. "If what they claim is correct, then Kaede, I did not turn you into a girl. That can't be.. It would certainly explain why your soul was naturalized anew in our world, rather than coming here in an alien body. Perhaps it was part of the Holy Father's plans all along. "That can't be right! I don't just remember fragments; I have all my prior memories. "Don't jump to a conclusion just because it removes blame from you!" Kaede glared, seething. "I did not say that is what happened. I merely said it was a likely scenario." His focus was still concentrated on the vial, his poker face impenetrable. "Great, now I can't even be sure whether my parents think I'm missing or just dead. Not that there's anything I can do about it outside of useless worrying.". "Do not bother getting too comfortable. I need a urine sample from you soon," Pascal noted, only to receive a groan in response. After sitting back up and chasing the evil thoughts away, Kaede pouted towards the corner closet door that held the heavy chamber pot. Leaning against the wall next to it, there was now a pile of treated wood, packed cotton, and velvet fabrics. "Materials for fabricating a bed? Yes. I retrieved it from the quartermaster this morning," Pascal commented as he scrutinized the vial's color change. If looks could kill, the one Pascal received wouldn't have left even a speck of dust.

A Peaceful Day

With his top button on, Pascal put the medal around his neck and pinned it into place, then flipped down his collars. Adjusting it carefully, he made sure the gleaming black Knight's Cross outlined in white gold was

perfectly centered. Today was the first time that Pascal saw Kaede's sleeping face. "C-couldn't give me a few more minutes?" Kaede yawned as her thin arms stretched out, her eyes still closed. I have already given you leeway today. You need to wake up at the same time as everyone else when I go campaigning.". Pascal slowly waved his hand over her while he whispered the Refreshen spell. Maybe he overdid it a little. Kaede looked like she was sporting a disgruntled blush. "Better. Now, dress up and remember your research tasks today.

Kaede swore that the familiars' whole 'eyes and ears' concept made her senses more keen than necessary. She couldn't even concentrate with all the whispering that reached her ears. It was a Monday morning, but a few dozen people occupied the library nonetheless. "Hey, familiar girl," a tall lady with long, golden-blond curls slammed her palms into the desk. "Tell your master to keep you on a shorter leash. "Pascal says you're a blithering idiot and that I should ignore you. "Listen here you little bitch, I don't care if your master reserved this desk. "Ah, that is Lisel von Strauss." Pascal's voice popped into her head. "So give them the beatdown you showed me. They will not even see it coming." Pascal sounded oddly proud. Most of them probably believe I'm just a pushover familiar girl who surprised you with a punch, and that the story got exaggerated somehow -- Ariadne does harbor a very public grudge against you, after all. I'd prefer it if they kept thinking that way. Without someone she was friendly with -- or at least getting friendly with -- Kaede didn't exactly feel comfortable around new people or places. With her books in hand, she headed back to the dormitories, ignoring the noblewoman's departing screech. Yeah yeah, I'm just a commoner, foreigner at that. Kaede rather missed having Pascal's 'you-are-all-idiots' attitude shield her from the rest of the world.

After another lunch in the dining hall with Pascal, Kaede returned to his room to continue her research. Still, thrice was enough. By the third time, she finally told Pascal to ask first before reaching through her eyes and ears. Conclusion #1: Fantasy realms needed a magical version of the Internet, not to mention magical Google and Wikipedia. Conclusion #2: She was rapidly becoming a shut-in, emerging only to retrieve food and books,

and conversing with barely more than one person per day. The door then opened without waiting for a response. "I'm sorry Miss, the third years are taking a required course right now. "Don't worry about it. My name is Kaede, what's yours?". "M-marina," she bowed. "I'm one of the two maids responsible for the third-year students, Miss Kaede.". "Just Kaede is fine. It's not like I'm one of those noblemen.". "Ah, I've heard.. that you were summoned from afar.. "That's right." Kaede tried not to make the maid Marina any more nervous, but all she managed to keep up was a wry smile. "Do you normally only clean when nobody is here?". "Yes!" Marina nodded bit too eagerly. "The nobles do not appreciate seeing us common servants at work, so we try to be discrete whenever possible.". Thinking back to her dining hall experiences, Kaede remembered that Pascal never even acknowledged, let alone thanked, the servants who brought his food. Nor, for that matter, did most other nobles she saw, except... "Stupid nobles with their oversized noses and squinty eyes need to learn some respect," Kaede lashed out at the opulent room she stayed in. Her gaze then returned to find Marina grinning back in silent and total agreement. "I also heard you gave Mister.. Kaede's eyebrows disappeared into her bangs for a second. I swear, how do nobles keep any secrets from these servants?. "Yeah, a surprise kick to the crotch and he couldn't even defend himself, imagine that," Kaede lied with a totally unapologetic grin. "And not really, Pascal has actually respected me more since then. For a brief second, Kaede thought Marina's eyes glittered in amazement. Within minutes, they were chatting like friends, bonding through the power of complaints. In fact, she hadn't even realized that since becoming a girl, she had become far more whinier, albeit for good reasons. Nevertheless, it quickly bridged the distance before Marina was comfortable enough to ask her first personal question:. "I'msorrythatwasinappropriateofme!" Marina blurted out as a tear slid down Kaede's cheeks. "Yes, I do miss home. I wish I could return, but I can't, so there's no point worrying over it.". She didn't even bother correcting Marina's guess about her origins. Marina had to return to her maid work soon after, and Kaede rediscovered her amusement at what seemed to be a magical vacuum cleaner powered by ether-storing crystals. Not being a mage, Marina couldn't actually turn the appliance on or off, only manipulate its intake controls.

Pascal's last course of the day was held in the second drill hall. It was more of a stone amphitheater, but with a massive stage ringed by only two meager rows of benches. The only acceptable tools of teaching and learning were spells and swords. The usual homework was recovering from injuries, which automatically made students strive for perfection. "As you all know, the most commonly practiced combat magic style in Hyperion is Aura Magic, utilized for its multiple stances that shift and adapt to circumstances, as well as high spell acceleration which allows rapid ether transfer and spellcasting. However, contrary to many claims, the popularity of Aura Magic is not an indicator of superiority. Contrary to both his name and occupation, Professor Sir Siegfried von Kirchner looked anything but martial. "...The key to winning is found not just in practice and experience, but a thorough understanding of the other styles' capabilities. Professor von Kirchner and the rest of the class quickly left the platform for the benches, leaving just Pascal and the fiery-haired Reynald on stage. Both of them had agreed heartily to the professor's request, but neither of them looked thrilled as they confronted one another. Leaping forward, Pascal charged Reynald without delay, his blade thrusting forth and slashing down. "Armor Aura Burst!" the redhead called, sending out a pressurized blast of air as he used his aura stance switch to conjure an invisible suit of magic armor. Meanwhile Pascal activated the second four buffs of his usual defensive array, followed by scattering an entire bag of runic pebbles across the arena. Burst-mode Aura Magic was known for having the highest spell acceleration of all casting styles, but it had a high tendency to overwhelm the nerve conduits and leave the body numb. Prolonged use could even lead to temporary or permanent paralysis. The X-shaped fire blast sucked in atmosphere like a black hole as it soared towards Pascal. The Runelord staggered. Steam began to pour from his sizzling body as hostile antimagic crashed against his ether network. A second lightning-transformation put Reynald just behind the distracted Pascal. Coming out in a spin and infused with the ward-piercing Negation spell, his dual kukris struck the Runelord like twin rotor blades, bringing the latter to his knees. "Stop!" the professor called out. Mister von Witzinger, please escort him to...". "The four-part spell Mister von Witzinger just used is the bane of Runic Magic users' tendency to over-buff themselves. "Remember that a spellsword relies neither on blasting the opponent nor overwhelming them

through pure martial prowess, but by a synergistic combination of arcana, steel, and tricks," the short professor emphasized. "Barrier Armor plus leather and steel will reduce most physical attacks to mere wounds. "To score a decisive hit, you must be flexible, you must be adaptive. Think on your feet and respond accordingly, let magic be your fist and bring home victory!". "Of course," Pascal grunted as he stood back up, still sore all over.

"So.. where's my bed?" Kaede didn't even bother taking her eyes off her book. "In Phantasia," Pascal grumbled before climbing into bed bare-chested, snuggling just close enough without touching her. "Ugh, my back still hurts; that Reynald is unnaturally good at dueling.. "His Holiness is fair," she replied, her casual eyes still reading. ...Like that, another day passed in the new world. "I'm sorry," Marina trembled, her eyes nailed to his feet. It's hard to do it without being noticed, so I'm trying to gain her trust.". "Well, you have one more week. If we miss the deadline and our lord is punished by the Emperor, it will be on your hands, girl.

The Perfect Contrast

After just one week, life in the new world was already starting to fit into a schedule. Her reasons were mostly split between I don't want to become a shut-in and she's as true as nobility gets. Although if Kaede examined her decision tree, she's absolutely gorgeous also ranked top five on the list. "I'm going into town for an errand today. Would you be interested in joining me? We can shop for your clothes while we're there.". Calm down, calm down! Kaede's thoughts scrambled, her cheeks instantly glowing. There's nothing unusual about this! Stop jumping ahead because she is certainly not probing your interests or anything!. "Of course I'm interested! Although.. I'd better ask Pascal first." Kaede left out the or there'll be hell to pay. "Of course, but please remind that self-centered prick that we are shopping to give his cute familiar a makeover. "--since we're meeting an old friend dropping by. We leave in an hour, so please meet us at the inner wall gates before then."

"Fine," Pascal gave in at last, before turning to rummage through a drawer. Being a girl does come in handy at times, Kaede grinned back. "Also, I want you back by fourteen hundred. We have a ton of work to go through this weekend. ...Or, maybe not. Her urge died instantly as she

replied with a deadpan "Yes Sir.". Given Ariadne's breathtaking charm, Parzifal didn't turn out nearly as outstanding as Kaede imagined. He wore the same black uniform as Pascal and most cadets, except adorned with white lines instead of crimson patches. Against Ariadne's burning-red outfit -- which few other students had -- it only distinguished her further from the crowd. "Hello, Miss Suvorsky," he barely nodded, not all that pleased to see her. "It's a pleasure to meet you milord. I'm honored by Ariadne's invitation to come along.". Parzifal's attempt to hide the lemon taste made it obvious he was anything but glad. Yet he swiftly plastered a grin across his expression as Ariadne turned towards him. Kaede thought it best to just smile and wait out the intimate moment. Almost every person the couple came across greeted them with a friendly face; noble or commoner, staff or servant, it didn't seem to matter. Their network of acquaintances and friends appeared to cover the entire academy. It was a world of difference compared to how Pascal was treated. "Good morning, Gerd. Exciting plans this weekend?". Perhaps the greatest surprise to Kaede was how genial Parzifal was. His greetings lacked Ariadne's energy, but his smile was always gentle and delightful. "Once outside the Lockdown ward, we're teleporting," Ariadne answered. Towns also have beacons to guide the teleportation into a sparse area. Fortified cities and military installations, on the other hand, are often entirely warded.". Any convenience must also be defended against. Nice to see that humanity remains the same wherever you go. "Alright, we're out. Grab my hand and hold on.". Kaede took up her offer and, despite her anxieties, struggled to keep her eyes wide open. "Merge Targeting.. Chain, Astral Teleport!". Kaede braced herself, but it proved impossible to prepare for. Then, as quick as it came, everything popped back out and returned to normal. "Should we bring the little miss to 'Midnight Crescent' and let them take care of her? It wouldn't do to drag her with us to meet Eckhart." Parzifal spoke this time. His polite words may have phrased a question, but his unwavering tone left little room for negotiation.

Kluis proved to be a hybrid between a sleepy rural town and a trade stop that supplied the Königsfeld Academy. What Kaede found most surprising was how remarkably clean Kluis was compared to the medieval towns of Earth. There were no exposed sewage, no muddied paths, not

even any aired garbage outside the usual litter. In the end, Kaede was left behind in Ariadne's recommended 'Midnight Crescent' tailor shop while the couple went off to meet their guest and enjoy the day. She couldn't really complain; it was their day after all. Besides, the owner, Krista, an elderly lady in her late fifties, was very enthusiastic. Unfortunately, for all her talents, Krista wasn't a mage, so her designs had to be sent elsewhere for manufacture and enchantment in the highest quality nobles expected. Nevertheless, Ariadne had remarked that the store was a popular shop for the academy's students and earned good money for their ideas. By one o'clock, Ariadne returned by herself to pick up and send Kaede back. "Sorry about this, even though I invited you," the lady apologized. "Parzifal is usually friendly to everyone, but he dislikes your prick of a master in particular. "Parzifal is on the administrative track and the healer's program, since his dream is to become the Surgeon-General of Weichsel. Probably explains why she flaunts their relationship so much. What is she, the perfect girlfriend? Talk about missing out on Pascal's part.

"Sorry! It's hard to run in these heels, and there was a long way." Kaede looked at the clock. That will be the only break you get this weekend," Pascal decreed as he took her wrist and dragged her out the door. His tight grip was painful and his quick stride almost made her trip several times. Sheesh, I'm not a stress ball. Don't take your irritation out on me!. Once the rising pearl of the Inner Sea region, the coastal metropolis of Arcadia had since fallen into decadence and slow decline. Market control discouraged competitiveness and brought stagnation, widening the class divide through the reduction of opportunities. What remained was a city of servants and courtiers, plebeians who slaved day and night for the Senators and their wealthy patrician supporters. The legislature had long stopped being a representation of the people, its subcommittees now fraught with corruption and lobbyists' interests. Generations of adoptive sons taking the crown -- many of them wise and just -- nevertheless laid a disastrous precedence to the line of Imperial Succession. The ensuing civil war scorched the Holy Imperium with flames for six years. With the help of the patricians' bottomless funding and the Legions once loyal to his late birth father, the adopted Gaudentius Aurelius brought an end to the bloodshed by seizing the laurels. Troops are pouring across the Grand Trait

Bridge by the thousands every day as they march towards the Rhin-Lotharingie border. It is only a matter of time before they declare Holy War against the Empire of Rhin-Lotharingie." "His Holiness, Pope Vigilius has long harbored a hatred for Emperor Geoffroi of Rhin-Lotharingie for his revocation of Papal Investiture within the Empire. In a game of thrones, machinations involving the church had never been about piety. "Even without aid from those petty Lotharin nobles, that alone should be enough to fracture the Empire during its most critical hour. It will also strip Geoffroi of any right to call upon crusaders' aid. "Imperator, during the War of Imperial Succession, Weichsel not only doubled their landmass by stealing our northern territories, but also struck fear into the heart of Rhin-Lotharingie before the two states could forge a defensive treaty against Imperial retaliation. "When we want your sermons, Stilius, we will ask for it. "Yes, Imperator." The General bowed his head in servitude. Weichsel Marshal von Moltewitz handed them a series of disastrous defeats before winter could embrace the Northern Sea. The Emperor cared nothing for the barbaric Northmen who still worshipped pagan gods. However, their presence was necessary to occupy the Imperium's northern foes -- once again of the same faith. "A great shame. We can only pray that tensions at their northern border will at least pull Weichsel's armies away. "The Northern Legions stand ready under Gaius Aetius. They're assembled near the Weichsel-Lotharin border, poised to apply pressure against either military. With geopolitics always being a game of balance, great powers with capable rulers did not wage war unless they could guarantee the noninterference of their neighbors. However, even wiser rulers did not reveal their fangs until their foes were battered and ripe for the taking. "You have done well, Stilius." The Emperor gave his praise as though gifting a cold, wintry wind. "The Grand Republic will adhere to their policy of non-interference unless they feel threatened, and the Shahdom of Chorasmia is currently fighting off an invasion from further east. "Yes, Imperator. I have already dispatched three of my best Mantis Blade squads north. Holy Emperor Gaudentius nodded. Stilius was a first rate general who had never failed him before. He hardly cared if it they rang dark and sinister against the shadowy halls.

Inquisitive Hope

By Monday afternoon, Kaede was starting to feel burnt out. Over a week of almost nothing but research pushed even her focus. "You're welcome to come down and visit us in the servant's quarters," she offered, her smile bright enough to light the room. "It's just beyond the kitchens at the end of the dining hall.". "I'd love to," Kaede beamed back. Are you around here during the weekends?". Most of the staff lives around the nearby town of Kluis and goes back home during the weekend," Marina explained as her hands continued to rearrange and wipe the tabletops. "But just enough of us are left to keep the kitchen and dining hall running. "Wow, that must be tough. Two years without a single break.". Kaede couldn't imagine doing that herself. With her modern standards, she would lose control from sheer stress alone. "I was an orphan raised on the western borders of Rhin-Lotharingie," Marina casually spoke without any of the melancholy expected of such words. "My parents died during the chaos of the last war ten years ago.". "I'm sorry," Kaede muttered back with downcast eyes, uncomfortable after breaching such a topic.

In an unusual turn of events, Kaede found herself waking up late at night. She looked at the wall clock. It was four in the morning, over eleven hours since she last checked the time. "I was searching for my cup.. but I couldn't find it and was getting thirsty, so I just used yours...". "It was on the floor also, just beyond your reach. Neutralize spells had no effect on you, nor would Rejuvenate wake you up. Kaede took a moment to run through her memories again. It was just like most other weekdays since she had been here. Nothing unusual happened. my body aches, but not in any specific spot as much as all over.". it's true that I haven't been sleeping well, and someone keeps waking me up every morning; not to mention changing bodies might still be taking its toll." Kaede glared at Pascal with an accusing scowl. "But I didn't feel dizzy or anything outside of the usual sleepiness. "I did run the basic tests on your blood while you were out, and all I can say is that you are not showing signs of any major illness we know of." He then stood up and began taking off his dress shirt: "Take the day off tomorrow and sleep in. In the future, tell me when you are feeling under the weather.

Kaede's morning routine must have set her biological clock. Pascal made a surprise return after the meal. With no desire to hear any grumpy orders to rest, Kaede pretended to still be asleep. Her morning and afternoon trips to the library were far less enjoyable. Other than differences in appearance, Samaran physiology was almost equivalent to that of Hyperien humans. The only major difference lay in their blood, as the crystal-clear Samaran 'fluid of life' was known for its healing properties. It could close wounds in under a minute and chase away all but the worst of diseases within a day. Scholars believed that the blood was the source of their longevity. Few Samarans were innately capable of sorcery, yet all of them shared the same lifespan as the healthiest of human mages. Given the fact that infusions of it actually did treat diseases and improve health, Samaran blood was a highly-sought commodity for as long as history remembered. As a result, adult Samarans within the Grand Republic paid a very literal 'blood tax'. Nevertheless, no less than three layers of security zones and checkpoints covered the Grand Republic's borders, and trade was inspected to near stifling ends for smuggling. Samarans outside the Grand Republic guarded themselves carefully, as human traffickers would pay extravagantly for a living Samaran body with a crushed will. For a second time, Kaede found herself glad that Pascal gave her a set of defensive runes. Unfortunately, she found nothing about Samarans being prone to instantaneously fainting. If anything, the healing properties of Samaran blood should reduce the likelihood of such occurrences. After packing up several cultural books plus a tome on the history of familiars into the extra-dimensional messenger bag Pascal gave her, Kaede departed the library for the dormitory keep. But as she turned around the central keep, her legs froze mid-step upon coming across the most unusual sight:. On the grassy lawn of one inner castle courtyard was a giant amorphous thing that could only be described as a massive blob of silken tofu the size of a small car. Standing next to it was Parzifal, periodically nodding his head and petting the giant tofu as though interacting with it. "That... a creature...!?". "Yes. White puddings belong to the ooze kingdom of creatures," Parzifal continued with just a bare tinge of courtesy. The giant tofu wobbled like jelly under his gentle caress. Kaede's eyes almost popped out of their sockets when it bounced once, like a child hopping in joy. It was so far outside the realm of Earth biology that Kaede didn't even know

how to react. "What does it.. It really is living tofu!!! her battered logic puked out before fainting. Meanwhile, images of cavemen hunting packs of wild tofu with spears paraded across her mind. "--Animals in the mountains treat them as a roaming food source during the winter, and so do the people living there.. "Already used to it," Parzifal sighed. "Seriously, Reynald, just because your friends don't hand out military punishments doesn't mean you should keep us waiting. Small and skinny, Reynald was barely one-sixty-three (5'4") and virtually bounced across the distance with his overflowing energy. "Sorry sorry," Reynald waved in apology before stepping up with a large tin bucket in hand. "Well well, if it isn't the Runelord's familiar -- the commoner who walloped the princeling." Reynald circled around Kaede, examining her as he went. "Aren't you a bit too adorable to be giving someone the fisticuffs?". With her heels on, Kaede was actually a touch taller than Reynald. But as he spiraled close to her, her gut instincts began to knot themselves in discomfort. "Miss, you are way too precious to be a decoration for that noble jerk." He bowed lightly before extending his hand. "Please, allow me to take you home instead and treat you like the warm and tasty muffin that you are.". Kaede's brows twitched twice in irritation. Then, her face flushed red as she felt his hand snake behind her and brush down against the skirt covering her rear. "Well.. that cleared some doubts!". Even with a hand rubbing his blackening eye, Reynald's cheery grin seemed to only widen with delight. "Little weak but just the right amount of spice. Kaede stiffened and hesitantly took two steps back, her fingers poised to stab the runes on her forearm just in case. But Parzifal interjected and stepped in to face the shorter boy:. "Control yourself, Reynald. Just because she's not a noblewoman doesn't mean you can blatantly insult her like this.". Reynald scowled. No, pouted was a better description. "Sheesh, you're never any fun, Parzifal. Fine fine," he then walked towards the white pudding and, with one scoop, filled his bucket with a chunk of the giant tofu. "Thanks as always bro!" Reynald began to walk off, backwards. Talk about noble hypocrisy, Kaede thought. Even 'that jerk' Pascal has more propriety than him. "I'm sorry about that," Parzifal apologized in his deep, sincere voice. "Reynald doesn't mean any harm by that; he just doesn't know any boundaries on when to stop fooling around.". "Yes, actually. I would like to ask if you know anything that may cause someone to fall unconscious with

no warning, especially a Samaran.". "Yes. Me," Kaede nodded. Parzifal scratched his head. But his eyes focused within an instant, revealing the concentration of an apprentice physician who took his job with utmost seriousness:. "But if you don't mind some blood testing, come with me to the healers' chapel and maybe we can find something out. You can tell me what happened along the way.". "Sure. Thank you," Kaede agreed and began to follow him. "Out of curiosity, what did Reynald want with a chunk of.. "He has a baby skywhale familiar that's barely old enough to cut milk. Kaede simply nodded. Compared to sentient tofu, skywhales felt like a perfectly logical animal in the world.

The healer's chapel was a sterile white hall full of beds, which Kaede now found unusual because it was the only room painted white in the entire castle complex. Parzifal still held one of them in his hands, through which he had examined Kaede over the past half-hour. She felt oddly naked under his focused gaze, but not exactly uncomfortable thanks to his professional demeanor. "As far as I can tell, there's nothing wrong with you, other than a slight vitamin-D deficiency," Parzifal noted as he put the quartz screen back onto his lap. "You need to come outside more often.". "Well.. people haven't exactly been welcoming to me.". "Yes, and I haven't exactly been helping. I know it's no fault of yours, but.. "I've heard from Ariadne. Don't worry about it," Kaede rushed to wave it off before changing the subject back: "Do you know any other reason why people here might faint suddenly?". "Our medical capabilities are nowhere perfect, and there are plenty of possible reasons for losing consciousness over some condition we either overlooked or simply can't detect, but..." his gaze turned from contemplative to warning. "Not for ten plus hours; that's just too serious not to leave an evident sign. "No, but a hidden magical aura isn't a natural occurrence. Although, given your master, I wouldn't be surprised if that were the case.". "Pascal said the Detection spells came out clean. "Reliable enough for everything conventional," Parzifal simply shrugged. "But healers aren't in the subterfuge or poison business, and that spell is old, ancient. "Thank you so much for this. "Not to sound mean, but I'd do it even if you were the devil's daughter -- that's what it means to take the healers' oath. However, I do promise to try to be

cordial in the future.. "Not at all. As Ariadne said, you're a very generous guy."

On her way back to the dormitory keep, Kaede replayed all of yesterday afternoon in her memories. But why would Marina want to harm Pascal? And if this is poison, it's far too low grade.. Kaede knew that history was abundant with cases where the agents of nobles bribed or blackmailed servants into carrying out their dirty schemes. Pascal was the son of Weichsel's Marshal; his father no doubt gathered plenty of enemies. I can't just lay suspicion on Marina for no reason. Who knows what these nobles may do to a mere servant girl?. Pascal would return from class soon. Therefore Kaede's only course of action was to confirm for herself tomorrow. The fact he knew exactly why she ignored him only deepened his melancholy. Ariadne's invitation to Kaede didn't help his moodiness, but it was a mere drop in the bucket compared to Sylviane hanging up his calls on both Saturday and Sunday nights. Kaede's collapse on Monday night began to push his limits. Fatigue was but one factor; Pascal was also not used to being emotionally strung. On Tuesday morning, a noble who unwisely spoke ill of Rhin-Lotharingie's recent policies received a ferocious tongue lashing from Pascal. As expected, the assignment kept Pascal contemplative for the remainder of the day and well into the evening. "Hey Pascal," Kaede asked from behind him. "Did you know that the familiars of mages who die of old age often revert back to normal and live on?". "Yes." Pascal didn't even bother to look up from his writing desk. Sighing, Pascal put down the ink stone that he used to channel words straight onto parchment. "I have thought about this Kaede, but by all knowledge there is simply no viable solution. "By some fluke of the spell that I still cannot figure out," Pascal admitted with a scowl. Then, his words almost challenging: "I was impressed how quickly you were adapting to life here. "Oh please, it's only been eleven days!" she retorted. "Philosophically, I adhere to the Eastern views of my home world more than the West. The Holy Father may have plans for us all, but under his guidance we shall still strive for our cause, Pascal reflected as Kaede declared her intent with hardened eyes. For a second he almost felt impressed, with the urge of pulling into a theological discussion. "Yes, from millennia ago when fiends, archons, and dragonkind still waged wars across our world, when the very

nature of magic was different," Pascal's irritated words cut her off. "I am not going off to chase sorcery that has been lost for over a thousand years over a pretty wish. His fatigued thoughts stumbled through a fuzzy world of internal analysis, cycling through memories of the past week-and-half. "Maybe. But I promise you that if some clue of it being reasonably possible appears, I will look into it. The sound of a book slamming shut came from behind him as Kaede haphazardly tossed it onto the counter. She then lowered herself into the bed and pulled the bedcovers over her head. The emotions that flowed across their link had never grown beyond mere annoyance. But even that, when added to his own irritation, was enough to push his current self-control, or lack thereof.

Bonds of Faith

"Marina! You have a visitor," the burly chef called out. It was only a half-hour after breakfast at the dining hall. It was the perfect time to accost one of them without being overheard by the rest. "I do wish this was purely a social call, but.. Marina's shoulders stiffened as her smile froze. The walls here may be thin, but all of the other servants are out busy at this hour. It should be fine as long as we keep quiet." She then turned around towards the kitchens' rear. Is it usual for a maid to know even that much? Kaede wondered. The wide hallway behind the kitchen connected directly to the outside. The other side held two gateways that linked to the servants' quarters, segregated by gender. Marina pulled Kaede into a small room just barely large enough to fit two sets of beds and still cram in a table. Clothes, including girls' underwear, hanged off a horizontal bar just above each bed. Closing the door behind her, Kaede hovered her palm above its knob and sealed the lock. "Spell-activation focus from Pascal. I can channel his magic to use a few basics.". Nodding, Marina gestured for Kaede to sit on one bed before following suit on the other. The mask that hid the maid's anxiety and nervousness was paper thin. It felt like the day they first met, rather than the relaxed conversations they had nowadays. If she really is a spy, she's not a very good one, Kaede thought. Being an amateur at this herself, Kaede opted for directness again. "The healers couldn't find anything wrong, so they suspected there was foul play involved. "Uh, no? I don't r-remember doing anything there except dusting. "I am now, thanks. But are you sure you don't remember anything weird in

there when you moved it for dusting?". Honestly, I didn't really p-pay much attention to it.. And even if I did, magic could easily hide something like that with glamor.". "True, and it's not like you'd be able to detect that kind of thing. Kaede trailed off as she thought back to her original plan. "No.. nothing that caught my eye.". "Y-yes I'm sure. I didn't do anything other than move it to clean.". "Marina, I really want to have you as a friend, so please, please don't lie to me. The two of them simply sat on their respective beds, staring each other down. Kaede really wished she could trust in Marina's words, but something just wasn't right. I borrowed a thought detection spellglyph from Pascal," she bluffed with her sternest expression. But I can use it well enough to know that you're lying to me.". "Then what are you hiding? You did do something.. "H-he'll know anyway.. Kaede sighed. She wasn't sure how she would manage if her gamble had proved wrong. "Pascal promised he will not intrude upon my senses without asking. If nothing else, he's a noble who values his pride and sense of honor. "--You'll just have to trust me," Kaede finished for her. "I'm the only one who can help you keep this under wraps.". i-it's just a knockout poison," the maid finally stuttered out. "It just leaves the one who drinks it unconscious for about twelve hours.". "It's.. it's the strongest antimagic poison available.". Sirens blazed through Kaede's mind as Marina revealed the latest information. Kaede almost froze on the spot. It certainly did not suppress a keen mind that was busy preparing a counter-attack. "I'd love for an opportunity to go back," Kaede's dry voice spelled out her wistful hope. "I-I don't know all the specifics but.. "Even if that's true.. that doesn't help me get back to where I come from." Kaede decided it was best to extract a proposal without revealing that she was from another world. "My m-master has an excellent Wayfarer -- a teleportation expert. Remembering that Pascal had also sought the aid of a Professor specializing in it, Kaede realized that the key to returning home probably laid in the wormhole-like effect of teleportation. It wasn't an assured ticket back. But with no alternative answers, it was also her only shot. "P-please," Marina knelt down and begged as tears streaked down her soft cheeks. Feeling a cold, metal vial press into her palm, Kaede slowly wrapped her delicate fingers around it as though it was precious and fragile. Meanwhile, her own emotions and thoughts lay in utter chaos:. But then.. will I even have another chance?. Kaede squeezed the vial in her hands. Though

certain that her answer should be obvious, she was nevertheless unwilling to close the other door. For a moment, Marina looked uncertain. I can't guarantee it, but I doubt my master will throw away a decade of work so easily while if I can still prove my worth. They will definitely give me a way out, which means helping a second isn't much harder. Barely nodding, Kaede looked down at the metal cylinder in her shaking hand. If you want to back out, this is your last chance. Once I tell the rest, they won't hesitate to k-kill you if you try to leave the plan.". Kaede wasn't sure if she dared to risk taking Marina's offer, realistically or morally. "No. Count me in."

why did you decide that on your own!?" the chief groundskeeper snarled again, this time in the dark confines of a storage cellar. "Our role is to observe and provide those killers with info, not to get involved ourselves!". The maid was sniffing with tears running down both cheeks. Marina was intelligent and resourceful to begin with, and her tears effectively disarmed others and made them underestimate how capable her mind was even under duress. "S-she's a Samaran; she dreams of returning home; and I k-know she hates aristocrats and her life here. "I-I believe her dislike of von Moltewitz is g-genuine. Furthermore, if I did not b-bring her in, she would certainly have revealed us to her master.". "S-she can be used as long as she has some t-trust in me, enough to give her hope. This way, even if she t-tells, we could at least use her for disinformation.". The groundskeeper sighed. While there were indeed nobles in the Empire of Rhin-Lotharingie who opposed their crown princess' betrothal -- even a matrilineal betrothal -- to the scion of von Moltewitz, he and Marina actually worked for a northern governor of the Holy Imperium, executing a direct mission from their Holy Emperor. "We'll need to ensure that she understands there will be consequences, immediate and deadly, should she dare to betray us. If our information checks out, the rest of us will reveal ourselves and make our move. "I-I understand. I'll inform her tomorrow."

conflicted, confused even, since early morning," Pascal voiced as they returned to the dorm room after dinner. His focused eyes turned around to meet Kaede's directly with deep concern. ...Or was it suspicion? She couldn't tell. She had known it likely wasn't possible to hide her

emotions from their 'passive link', and her sense of guilt was a dead giveaway. It really wasn't fair that he had a gateway straight to her heart and mind, one that she couldn't even shut. Her life now was not just one completely dependent on another, but one at the mercy of another. Yet in that laid the problem. She had no wish to be a mage's pet for her remaining life -- well over a century of it, given a Samaran's life expectancy. Kaede was almost surprised by that. He had managed to keep it in mind after all, however begrudgingly. Almost, because the slightest hindsight told her that his answer should have been expected. Even, especially, that night when he invoked his nobility against his own superiors in her defense. He could have cast her out from day one when she committed assault, yet he stayed up to watch over her when she was ill -- even if that was also his fault. He swayed between impenetrable composure and lashing out with childish tantrums. Had the circumstances been different, Kaede would have loved to work with such a man. "Companion and partner, huh?" Kaede repeated with the hint of a smile. There was no way she could contribute to killing someone who only wished for that. "That is a stupid question," Pascal replied without an instant of hesitation. Pascal couldn't have known what she did, but he also grew up in the courtly atmosphere of hiding daggers behind smiles. Kaede knew she had all the worrisome signs, the more so because they shared the familiar link.

Critical Appeal

The first winter cold front from the North Sea had arrived early this year. Flakes of snow already dotted the skies, leaving a sheen of moisture on the dormitory keep's stony roof. It was Saturday morning, and Kaede was meditating through archery as usual. Except this time, shooting was as much a nerve-calming exercise as an excuse to stay up there. After receiving her update from Marina, she had spent most of her waking hours over the past two days planning out different scenarios. There was no way Pascal didn't notice her reduction in research output, but he didn't say a word. Since the plot on Pascal's life did not launch into full swing on Monday night, Kaede surmised that the assassins must have Pascal and her under surveillance. This had allowed them to call off the final strike when she, instead of he, fell unconscious to the poison. "...Isn't it a bit chilly to be flying today?" Kaede said her pleasantries with the usual cheerfulness

while pressing a rune on her arm. She had asked Pascal -- privately over telepathy -- to load one set with utility spells instead of defensive enhancements. "Sorry Ariadne, but I need help. Do you have a spell to guarantee a private conversation? Best if it's as inconspicuous as possible." "My uniform has thermal adjustment, so a little cold doesn't really bother me." Ariadne nodded before her right hand twisted about in a series of odd gestures. "I'm guessing that prick ordered most of your clothes here, so ask him which one he had the enhancement put on. Her body was soon wrapped by a comfortable warmth that reminded her of insulated heating pads. "Sanctum Veil spell. Anyone trying to observe or listen in from the outside will just see and hear us discussing everyday things like the weather. "So," Ariadne stood eagerly with her hands propped at her waist. "What do you need help with? Need to give that self-centered prick a longer-lasting lesson?". Pascal must have been a lot worse two years ago to make her like this. "Actually, the opposite. I need help because someone is attempting on Pascal's life, for political gains as a matter of national security.". Kaede gave her keywords the verbal highlight to make sure Ariadne understood that this was not a personal matter, but one of interest to any aspiring knight of Weichsel. Otherwise, there was no way Ariadne would listen to a plan on helping her nemesis. "Marina, I take it?" Ariadne chuckled at Kaede's surprise. She's the maid responsible for cleaning the third-year boys' dorms." Then more sternly: "I'm surprised you didn't just report her. "And her group would disperse into hiding before they could be caught, which just delays them for a few weeks before they try again." Kaede countered, her eyes hard with determination. "I want to drag them out into the open and clean the entire mess in one sweep. But I'm not one to think anything is completely above me. History is altered not just by grand sweeping plans, but by all the little individual actions that made it possible.". Ariadne nodded with her usual smile: "You sound like my friend Gerd. "I'm also not stupid enough to tackle this alone, which is why I need your help. "I'm surprised you waited until today to ask me. If father hadn't received a last minute dispatch, I'd be gone for the holiday weekend by now.". "Sorry, but I couldn't approach you without being conspicuous, and everything depends on maintaining the lie," Kaede explained in apology. "Next Monday is Weichsel's National Day; I take it you didn't know?" Ariadne asked, and Kaede shook her head. "Nordkreuz is too far for that

prick to return often, but my estate isn't. "I could discretely approach your beloved Parzifal for help," Kaede shrugged as she silently scolded herself, realizing how much worse that alternative was. "But otherwise this really would be beyond me and I'd have to call off the bluff. The air between the two fell into a nervous silence as Kaede felt examined, scrutinized under magnifying eyes, while the noblewoman contemplated with one finger still held against her cheek. Then, just as Kaede was about to continue her drafted thoughts on persuasion, Ariadne nodded with a calm smile:. "It's the Holy Father's will then. I'll need to consult my friends before giving you a confirmation, but consider us tentatively in. "...That was a lot easier than I anticipated.. "I'll take offense if you think me a fool in politics, you know," Ariadne declared cheerily while puffing up her prominent chest. "The betrothal between that prick and Crown Princess Sylviane of Rhin-Lotharingie is well known...". "--It's also one of the founding stones of Weichsel's defensive military alliance with Rhin-Lotharingie. He.. Kaede's mind was still sorting out the information pileup. "We're not in that kind of relationship. In fact, that would be outright impossible for me even if he sought it...". Somehow, the mere thought of telling Ariadne about her gender mix-up just felt.. "--Anyway, I simply thought they were trying to provoke Pascal's father, the Field Marshal, into some kind of rash response in an upcoming incident. Wouldn't be the first time wars started prematurely because of an angry family member.". "I couldn't really narrow down much detail," Kaede admitted, "since I have no clue about the combat potential of your friends. But since Pascal is their main goal, his dorm is where we'll need the most help. "Then they can sandwich the attackers in from behind while Pascal buys time. "I can work with that plan," Ariadne agreed, her bright-cyan gaze smiling with approval. Either way, it sounds like I have a busy day ahead, so I will see you later, Kaede.". With a boot soon in the stirrup, Ariadne mounted her white pegasus in one swift motion.

It was hard to tell at times, since mages unsurprisingly had a spell for refreshing up after a sweat as well. Kaede knew that wasn't unusual for political arrangements of the period. But Pascal didn't just sound irritated; there was also a powerful longing buried underneath. "I do not believe a girl more beautiful than her could exist," he spoke of the princess, his awe

shining through even the dark clouds of melancholy. "She is a wonderful person as well, and will make an excellent queen. Kaede smiled. It was hard to tell whether or not Pascal actually loved his fiancée -- that was exceptionally rare in the political marriage custom. "Since I was nine," Pascal began to explain as a nostalgic smile entered his expression. "Weichsel and Rhin-Lotharingie were not formally at war during that chaotic time; both countries simply sought to take advantage of the Holy Imperium's civil war to lay claims, except these claims overlapped with each other. So when my father negotiated an end to hostilities between the two states and a partnership against our real foe in the south, her father, Geoffroi the Great, requested our matrilineal betrothal as the bargaining price. "Aren't you the heir of NordKreuz?" Kaede furrowed her brows. Although Nordkreuz was gifted to Father through lands annexed during that war, it was also a contested strategic position on the border. Our betrothal implied that after me, those territories would pass to the Empire of Rhin-Lotharingie. He also has daddy issues. Not surprising though, having to live in such an accomplished father's shadow. "That was Father's idea, and Sylv agreed to it as well. They both said that I needed 'experience', whatever that is supposed to imply." Pascal shrugged. "I am the only child," he sighed. "Mother died from a crippling war injury when I was just four, and father never remarried.

It was against all propriety for a lady to invite multiple men into her room, but this was also the only way she could guarantee their privacy. Unlike Parzifal, who wasn't good at any magic except bio-alchemy, and Reynald, who simply didn't care, Ariadne actually maintained periodic sweeps of her room. Reynald knew that as a proper noble, he was supposed to keep a healthy dose of paranoia. His voice was almost frozen, and Reynald wondered how cold his gripping hand must be at the moment. "--Let the Runelord deal with it by himself. He's always so high and mighty, so sure that he can do everything single-handedly. "What's the problem with that?" Parzifal countered. Why should we forfeit territory when we were winning? What did von Moltewitz get from Emperor Geoffroi that made him so anxious to sign such a treaty?". Sure, his son would become the Prince-Consort of Rhin-Lotharingie, but his successors would bear the name 'de Gaetane' instead of 'von Moltewitz'. For the

nobles' game of dynastic political ambitions, it was tantamount to suicide. Reynald hadn't forgotten about the childhood days when he absolutely worshiped the elder von Moltewitz as a conquering hero. In many ways, Pascal merely displayed the elder von Moltewitz's intolerance on a new magnitude. It wasn't easy, but having spent time on both sides of the fence, it gave Reynald a very objective view of the Marshal.. Meanwhile, Ariadne looked hesitant to continue. In fact, she was even nodding to Parzifal's continued list of accusations and complaints. Reynald considered Ariadne a great girl for his best friend. "Bro. I'm sorry to say this, but you're sprouting nonsense now.". "Oh, you remember that, don't you?" Reynald cut in with deliberately acidic words. Sometimes a bull was the only thing that could stop another rampaging bull. "Cut all that bullshit from the Marshal's enemies already and look at things from his perspective. Bloody-minded and merciless? Yes; my own family history proves it. But a natural genius in the art of war who proved his loyalty to Weichsel many times over? Also yes.". Reynald look back at Ariadne and nodded. What she needed now was precisely the approval of her original idea from others so that she could snap out of the moment of idiocy that Parzifal had dragged her into. In fact, I believe she's absolutely fracking right! This is above personal relationships we have with Pascal or his father; ALL of them. It's a matter of state, and we have the perfect opportunity to take care of it.". "But we're still students. Something like this should be left...!". Well, she was a lot more diplomatic than that.. "But.. One of the best aspects about Parzifal was that he never gave up easily. If we lose this alliance with Rhin-Lotharingie, and the Holy Imperium takes this as an opportunity to stick a vengeful sword in our backs.. how many people do you think are gonna get killed? Are you really sure you're willing to take that chance?". Parzifal did not speak another word of disapproval after that. His instincts as a healer simply overruled the rest of him. "What? I'm just the dumb knight," he grinned. "Parzifal may be the heart of our little group, but you're the Captain here, girl!".

The white outfit did indeed have a uniform-like design, with its stiffly-cut shoulders, folded collar, and black tie. Mission is accepted. Parzifal and Reynald will monitor the situation and engage the assassins from behind; please leave the coin scrying focus in your room. "Pascal, please sit still and

pretend you're still reading," Kaede asked over the telepathic channel. An hour went by as Kaede explained everything that happened, including the operational plan. "Fine," he relented. "And I admit Reynald is an excellent fighter to have as backup. "Healers always come in handy. It's better to be safe than sorry." Kaede filled Pascal's chalice with freshly-conjured water, then poured the antimagic poison in her vial into her cup in front of the chalice. Any observer from outside the windows would only see it being added to Pascal's drink. "Of course not. You're going to drink this water and pretend to pass out, and then I will go to the roof and signal the assassins. "Then this should go smoothly." Pascal concluded before closing his book. With his right hand reaching for the goblet, his left took out a pair of a small, white gloves and laid them on the table. "Then hopefully, by the time I receive my first command, I will be able to appoint you a position on my staff. With most of the water downed, Pascal's grip slowly let the goblet clang to the floor while he slumped over onto the desk. Even from directly behind him, Kaede thought it was a very convincing performance. They have a built-in pocket dimension like the type most mages use. Held within the left one is a morphic blade -- consider it a gift from me. Kaede prodded Pascal twice, as though testing the poison's effects, before she reached over and took the gloves. "Of course. You are my familiar." Did I..

For Weichsel, Not You

Prefect Gelasius lowered his composite bow as he rose from the shadows of the far side battlements. Two minutes later, six vaguely humanoid clouds blew onto the rooftop. Their outfits were all dark gray, each hidden beneath a hooded cloak. "Did I?" Gelasius spoke casually over their linked telepathic channel as he stowed the bow away in a belt pouch. "I believe the words were 'I'll try to bring her out alive if the operation succeeds'. "Then sadly, the familiar didn't survive her master's death." The prefect's stern voice then stamped the discussion with finality: "Enough. Placidia, Cassio, and I will stay here to maintain situational control and await your return." Sebastian then led two other assassins into the keep, their steps silent and their silhouettes blending into the shadows. Gelasius missed the days when he personally lead the hunt as the strike section leader. He ignored the faint, wheezy breathing that came from the unmoving familiar.

Sebastian then turned the dispelled door handle before all three stepped inside. Nearly blinded by the glare from hundreds of magical auras that saturated the room, he dismissed his Aura Sight spell before advancing. The two other assassins took guard positions on each side as Sebastian advanced forward for the kill. By organizational tradition, they strove to rely on the most certain method of elimination whenever possible -- death by decapitation. "Cyclone Blast," muttered Pascal even as he lifted and turned his eyes. The strike leader Sebastian spun aside to dodge the gush of hurricane-force winds, but the impact itself had never been Pascal's aim. Detonations rocked the room as the air was instantly filled by flying shrapnel -- cutting shards of rock and jagged splinters of wood blown off the nearby furniture and walls. But while Pascal lay safe behind his Barrier Armor and Spellshield Fortress, the same could not be said for his would-be killers. With all three of them bloodied by the ambush, Marcellius, the junior member who stood closest to the entrance, spun back around the doorframe and into the hallway. Spells flew through the hall as the wardbreaker Gallien laid down covering fire from behind conjured stone battlements. Within mere seconds, a roaming cloud of whirling steel swept down the hall, dicing through anything softer than rock with impunity. Meanwhile, Sebastian charged at Pascal without hesitation. Even with one arm shattered by the runic assault, his other was still armed and ready to rend the flesh from his foe. Renewing his penetration aid with a flourish of the blade, Sebastian's second slash struck horizontally and sliced through two more spellshields. Teeth gritting against the burning pain, Pascal twisted his own arm against the blade, using his Barrier Armor and reinforced flesh to overextend the weapon before it could be withdrawn. He followed with a right hook, and his turquoise ring met cheekbones under the tattered hood with a resounding crack. Here, there were no rules or points awarded for extravagance. Here, lives would flicker and drown in the blink of an eye.

Reynald almost snorted as he burst across the stone battlements and cut the enemy mage down. not a single spell could knock off more than a mere handful of blades. The cloud of whirling steel continued its inevitable advance, as slow and unstoppable as a glacier. It was easy to evade, but Reynald could not afford to run away. "Dispelling Screen!" Parzifal shouted

from the other side of the hall. But nothing happened; the advanced spell combination simply wasn't a type that he had any affinity with. "Catalyst Dispelling Field," Reynald announced as he held up his right hand, fingers outstretched. Except one: the original. Forged from real steel that ignored the dispelling antimagic, it sliced right through the unarmored underside of his wrist. "GAHHHH!" Reynald cried out as he dropped his other weapon to grip the bleeding stump. "Sorry," Parzifal grimaced as he rushed up to collect his friend's severed right hand. "N-no time," came the response between Reynald's gritted teeth as his feet shuffled forward. "Yeah and you just cast a potent attack curse if you applied it without restraint. Reynald soon reached the entrance to Pascal's room, now sealed by a curtain of iron. Remember what I told you before: your specialty is bio-alchemy. If there's no foliage in the fight, then conjure some ferocious man-eating plants or something to use. Motivation came instantly even if clarity did not. Parzifal's brows were folded with uncertainty, but he nodded to Reynald with determination as his friend's glove stretched out against the iron wall. After concentrating his magic, Reynald's remaining fist slammed against the barrier, opening a man-sized hole through layers of metal. "Flourishing Brambles. Parzifal conjured a single sprout, then poured in transmutation magic to make it grow immediately into a mass of thorny vines. Spreading out across the room, the spiked tendrils leaped towards the last assassin like an unstoppable torrent. Caught off-guard by the attack from her rear, the assassin slashed and cut with her blade on impulse. As she opened her mouth to scream, spiked tendrils forced their way inside and down her throat. But after working in forensics and surgeons' labs, there wasn't much that could truly freeze the healer trainee. He quickly returned to the task of reconnecting and healing Reynald's severed hand. Meanwhile, the mass of vines that crushed Pascal's bed began to shrivel, becoming little more than a small pile of dried stems before vanishing entirely. "Thank you. I did not--" Pascal began as he stowed away his sword and attempted to make his mangled left arm look presentable. "Stuff a sock in it, Runelord," Reynald shot back with a disinterested glance.

"Comp.. No, int...!". Gallien's telepathic shout came garbled. The Königsfeld Academy was simply too saturated with magic for any ungrounded telepathic link to function properly without line-of-sight.

Three translucent black rings of magical energy formed the firing barrel as she charged up a pulsing multi-hit Disintegration Beam. But her shot missed as the pegasus corkscrewed across the air in a display of unparalleled horsemanship. Prefect Gelasius cursed as he recognized the dark, shadowy barding that cloaked the pegasus, not to mention the black-on-burning-red armor and uniform of its rider, galloping across the open skies like a burning cloud of smoke. It was the unmistakable sign of a Knight Phantom -- the elite order of marauding equestrians that struck fear into every participant of the last war. Dozens of topaz bolts surrounded him like a cloud of daggers, each spinning within a ring of magical energy. With one wave of his hand, the entire volley hurled out to meet the rider in a single coordinated barrage. Meanwhile, eleven defensive homing bullets -- an Ether Seeker interception spell -- shot out from the knight with a slash of her sword. But Cassio's projectiles, through weight of numbers, easily emerged victorious as they zoomed towards the airborne cavalier. His target weaved and dodged, soaring through the air with evasive maneuvers as Cassio's shots chased after her. The pegasus knight suddenly broke into seven copies, each streaking across the air on a different path towards the keep. "Third from the east," Gelasius ordered as his eyes swept the targets. His refined control over the Aura Sight spell was one of his specialties. With the prefect's guidance, Cassio unleashed his second volley. But the pegasus soon dived towards the ground, and the spellstorm's view became blocked by the stony roof. The shooting in the skies had drawn the attention of the academy's guards and staff, who joined the battle by taking shots against the intruders with spellfire and arbalest bolts.

Trying to monitor the situation was hard when Kaede lay facing the other way, doing her best to appear unconscious. Kaede had dropped onto the ground as soon as she saw the arrow that pierced her shoulder. She had almost failed to stifle her voice on the hard landing, especially when the impact shook the arrow lodged inside her. In hindsight, this should have been obvious from the start. No assassin's arrow would have missed her vitals from this close a range; the shot had been deliberate. So Kaede kept up the ruse by maintaining her only protection -- the illusion of an incompetent, unconscious girl. Her intellectual side remained worried, as

these were obviously professional assassins. But just as he had faith in her, she would uphold her belief in him. Besides, as Ariadne's Edelweiss took to the skies and combat began topside, Kaede had to focus on tracking the battle with only her hearing and limited sight. This was actually a blessing, as it gave her something other than the burning pain stuck in her shoulder to think about. Her first insight was that Ariadne was gaining too much altitude, probably to maintain distance for reaction time as she approached the keep for an overhead dive. Kaede slowly inched her right hand towards her left, fingers seeking her remaining Telepathy rune while praying that no one would notice. I may be an introvert, but I am NOT a shut-in..

Ariadne heard Kaede's voice resound through her mind. She followed them instinctively, weaving and dodging between the stone construction even as she pondered the familiar girl's fate. ...Or not. She smiled, realizing that the small girl was quietly biding her time. Now using the terrain to her advantage, Ariadne swerved through the gaps between buildings with precise horsemanship. Time came to a standstill as Ariadne locked gaze with topaz eyes determined to kill her. Expletives coursed through her frantic mind, but she knew it was already too late to evade... Then, a corner of her sight picked up movement near the rooftop floor. The caster's balance faltered, and most of his shots flew wide. The pegasus' phantom barding thinned as they focused on the points of impact to absorb the damage. Cursing audibly, the hooded mage waved his hand while his injured foot kicked out at Kaede, striking her in the face and leaving a bloody nose. In a single swing, she drew a thin shortsword from the glove and slashed at the mage's calves, slicing into one leg just above the leather boots and cutting through the bone. Withdrawing the blade, Kaede leaped off the floor and tackled him in the waist. Unfortunately, the momentum also sent the small girl tumbling over, and Ariadne watched in horror as the familiar's left hand struggled to hold onto the fortifications. Before she could finish casting an Air Glide spell to protect Kaede, the hand slipped off the stone and vanished from sight. Ariadne reined Edelweiss into a sharp bank. Perhaps she could still spot Kaede in time to save her. The distraction allowed another hooded assassin to catch the pegasus with a beam harnessing the sun's energy. "Air Cushion!" Ariadne cast upon her familiar

mount before her enraged eyes returned to her foe. Grabbing a wooden grenade from her belt pouch, she hurled it towards the keep and shouted "Ignition Dispel!". The spell caught the 'grenade' mid-flight, tearing away the shrinking spell to reveal a massive chest-high barrel which promptly ignited. Just before her mount crash landed, the last remnants of Edelweiss' shadowy barding tore away, forming a spectral steed that caught ablaze as it charged across the roof. It then rammed the offending mage head-on before detonating into a blazing inferno.

The fortifications were still slippery from the melted daytime snow, and Kaede had hardly three fingers' grasp on them. Looks like I don't belong here after all.. Kaede glanced down just before a giant mass of soft whiteness cushioned her fall. It was Parzifal's giant tofu, shifting up and down as though 'munching' on something.. "Barely. Saved by Parzifal's giant tofu.". After finishing whatever it was doing, the giant tofu bounced up to the wall and, somehow, began to climb using its silken white skin. Although the putty felt cold and jiggled as it moved, it was as soft as a pillow. Still mounting the giant tofu, Kaede took a moment to absorb the situation: a one-winged pegasus lay bleeding and maimed on the stone roof, while Ariadne spun her double-bladed sword but ten paces away. The lady knight danced across the floor with swift footwork, exchanging lightning-fast blows against the assassin's dual kukris. The spellsniper took notice and turned around to power up another spell. Yet before she could unleash even one beam, a storm of forest-green rays arced in from behind her like a rocket barrage. The human body had fine tolerances over its composition, which easily made many alchemy spells deadly.

Even slowed by burns, the superior experience and prowess of her opponent showed through the precision of his strikes. Her armor, both magical and real, was the only reason why he hadn't drawn blood after three grazing hits. Unfortunately, she knew that the returning Kaede was in no position to help. This was a deathmatch between two accomplished swordsmen, and any amateurish interference was as dangerous to one as the other. Spinning her twin-bladed Manteuffel sword around, Ariadne parried the closer kukri upwards while bringing her sword up and overhead into a full-aggression stance to pull his attention. With a tap of the trigger

that toggled her sword's two forms, she launched the shorter rear-blade at a downward angle. But it hardly affected the outcome as the lady knight brought her bastard-sized sword down with a mighty two-handed swing. Pinned down by his foot, the last assassin was cleaved from shoulder to waist before bursting into ashes. Panting hard with exertion and pain, Ariadne propped herself up using the sword while her left hand unbuckled the breastplate to clutch the wound underneath. Then, as if on cue, the wooden door into the keep burst open, spilling forth three men with weapons drawn. you should go take a look at Kaede first," she waved him towards the smaller girl, whose body now slumped unconsciously atop the white pudding familiar. "I bet her wounds are healing the wrong way after she left an arrow in for that long." Parzifal paused for a moment, clearly torn between caring for his girl's injuries and listening to her wishes. "Well.. would you look at us?" Ariadne said dryly as she staggered back towards Edelweiss, unconscious but otherwise alive. "I doubt these were run-of-the-mill assassins," Reynald replied, still warming up to his reconnected right wrist by rotating it in circles. "I agree," Pascal nodded. "The three assassins that led the attack on me also fought with two kukris each; their style emphasized striking speed." Reynald's brows rose. He then turned towards Pascal with contemptuous eyes:. "Great. You've got Imperial Mantis Blades on your ass now." Then, as both of them looked at him with agape expressions: "What? Did you forget my mama was one? Where do you think my martial skills come from? Papa, the retired Artillery General? Ha! He'd rather hold onto her coat while she bloodied thugs with twin hairpins." "Well..." Pascal cleared his throat sheepishly. "Oh, shut up for a moment you self-centered prick," Ariadne spat out bits of blood alongside her words.

Better Late Than Never

Kaede jolted upright on her cold and squishy seat, the shivering aftereffects of a light shock still coursing through her body. Her eyes snapped open, meeting the glow of a dozen bright white lights that floated overhead. "That's what a Rejuvenate spell actually feels like." Parzifal, crouched at her side, gave her a gentle smile. His eyes were still closed as the soothing warmth from his glove coursed through her right shoulder. Pascal, on the other hand, wasn't smiling at all. The frown under his golden

soft curls was halfway between worried and stern:. "I don't know; maybe five minutes?" She almost shrugged but caught herself in time. "Counting time isn't the best way of trying to stay conscious while pretending to be the opposite.". Examining her situation, Kaede found herself lying on Parzifal's giant tofu, its top in the form of a foam lounge chair. Instead, it felt as though submerged in hot springs, muscles relaxing and tension fading away. "Well, I guess passing off as dead was your safest option at the time. Just try not to jump off any buildings again." Pascal scowled and shook his head. "--And thank you." Pascal headed off her retort, his head nodding with gratitude. Kaede felt that something was off about Pascal. She could see it in his expression, hear it in his firm tone. "Well, you're all set now," Parzifal patted her shoulder before standing back up, leaving a lingering warmth on the smooth skin where her wound used to be. "I left an Invigorate spell that should tie up any loose ends over the course of the night.". "Thank you so much," Kaede bowed from her seat before grinning back. "And your familiar, for saving my life back there," she patted the giant tofu before standing up from it. "Don't mention it." he waved it off with a friendly smile. Kaede sent the white pudding familiar a grin as well, and could have sworn it bounced with joy. The two of them nodded back in their Knight Phantom uniforms, beaming, while their gloves continued to shed the light of healing. Lying between them was the pegasus Edelweiss, who still nursed a bandaged wing but appeared mostly healthy. "I know none of you three wish to hear it from me, but that only makes it more important that I must convey my utmost gratitude. differences, for the sake of the country, putting your lives in danger against the best assassins in Hyperion. It was clear that he now held a great deal of respect for all three of them, even if he had not before tonight. Even more apparent was his wish that things had turned out differently between them to this point. Glancing around, Kaede found the trio just as taken aback. It was clear that not one of them had expected such words from the prodigious and prideful Runelord. His legs stood stiff, his body still. But his eyes wavered, caught amid hesitation and resentment, uncertain between a chance to seek the unpleasant light, or returning to the familiar yet cold shadows. But Kaede knew that Pascal would not be Pascal without his resolve to follow rational judgment in his own way. "You said you will not fail to honor and repay the debt. Then why not start now with everything you have?

Better than your half-way apologies that do nothing but tarnish your word." "Yes, tell me about how 'efficient' apologies are when you actually make a sincere one for the first time in your life. Seriously, how many years will you keep accumulating interest? There are things you can't fix with magic or genius Pascal.. "Kaede is correct. I know that you have no reason to grant me any favors, but I ask for only a moment of your time. Even Kaede was stunned by the depth of Pascal's remorse, which sounded even more genuine than she expected. "Parzifal," spoke Pascal, turning towards the lean healer with crossed arms and meeting his aquamarine gaze. "I only wish I could take back the childish words I used that day to bring you low. Whether it was because of unpreparedness or due to Pascal's thoroughly uncharacteristic behavior, Parzifal and his two friends were stunned flat by the prodigy's admission of guilt. Their poker faces -- or Ariadne's once-serene smile -- were left agape, eyes blinking in disbelief amidst the dying flames of residual anger. Kaede noted that his eyes had slid back down to stare upon a faraway battlement. His shoulders were slumping more by the second, wavering on the precipice of yet another plunge from pride. "And Ariadne," he took a deep breath before he focused onto the lady's widened eyes. His gaze lingered for but a second before he spun around and strode straight towards the rooftop door.

"Because she offered me an option, in her own way. "Well fine, they tried to kill me." Pascal relented, but only slightly. I thought she was the first friend I made in this world. Okay? So, just let me reach out to her this once to get it off my conscience.. According to Reynald, the seven members we killed were a full Imperial Mantis Blade operation squad. This maid has already been here for two years; definitely not specific to this mission. "Then.. how many favors do you owe me for saving your life?". "None. You are my familiar.". Kaede sighed. She was starting to recognize the tone that signaled one of Pascal's off-putting and inappropriately-timed jokes. "I am Sir Pascal Kay Lennart von Moltewitz," he moved up to introduce himself. "May I remind you that I am a Captain in His Majesty's service and a feudal lord by right of succession, who happens to be the target of this attack. I also have no doubt that my father, Field Marshal von Moltewitz, will be maddened by this unprovoked treachery. The only difference was that a screen of shimmering violet magic lay over the

window, sealing it completely. Kaede guessed that there were probably also guards on the other side. "C-congratulations, Kaede," Marina sniffed. "I guess you deserve the faithful familiar award after all." Pascal finished twirling his hand about in mostly the same motions as Ariadne's Sanctum Veil spell from earlier in the day. He then presented a 'your turn' gesture before leaning back against the other bunk bed. "I didn't come here to be spiteful or interrogate you, Marina." Kaede spoke dryly as she met the maid's glassy sea-green eyes. "I don't want things to end this way between us, but there wasn't much of a choice before now." "Of course.. you have y-your master, and I have mine." "You owe him for your upbringing and your life. "I-if.. if you think I'm going to talk just because my fate is already sealed, then you can leave now," the maid retorted, her defiant words completely contradictory to her teary gaze. If we thought you had anything of value, there are ways to rip it out of your mind. for me, at least, and I am certain the King's Black Eagles would agree. "I said we are not interrogating you, and I meant it," Kaede continued. "E-except I asked you to help kill him..." Marina nodded towards Pascal. Kaede hadn't really thought this part through. She looked towards Pascal, hoping for an inspiration on the legal side. "She would rather die painfully for the one who raised her than give up any information. "If I can get the authorities to agree, it will be to release you into my jurisdiction, as I am entitled to compensation as the directly wronged party. Indentured.. "You're asking her to be a slave!?" Kaede glared at him. "Why? It is a perfectly practical form of punishment. We are not bartering them like trade goods as the Holy Imperium does," Pascal answered stiffly. "There is also no way the higher-ups will accept handing her over if I do not give her at least this much punishment. At least sixteen people died in this attack, Kaede, including one professor. Kaede didn't say another word. His accusation that she was pushing her cultural mores onto him had stung. Nearly two minutes passed, and Kaede began to wonder if he was silently accessing some memory storage device to check legality. You will leave tonight, before any unpleasant circumstances change things. Once you reach my family's estate, the Majordomo will arrange for the binding magical contract." "See to it then. I want the maid gone before morning." It took a moment before Kaede was able to recover and figured out what had just happened. "Around when I first spoke," Pascal shrugged, his eyes still examining Marina. Furthermore, since you

are my familiar, we really should work on improving your magic sensitivity. I doubt any conversation now will be to your advantage. As for the rest of tonight, I want you back in bed and resting. Despite being forced to rest early, Kaede did not sleep well overnight. Another unfamiliar ceiling, plus her anxieties about facing the trio tomorrow easily kept her up late.

After finishing his usual weekend morning workout, Parzifal refreshed himself before heading to the main keep for brunch. Reynald yawned from a step ahead. He had stayed up late last night, boasting of his martial exploits to impress guys and girls alike as their classmates requested the details of what happened. Parzifal didn't mind. His friend deserved the spotlight, and Reynald was already giving Parzifal more credit than he would like. Maybe it had. Part of him wondered what other miracles the Holy Father orchestrated last night. Year-long grudges did not disappear over a single apology, no matter how thorough and sincere it was. He could never thank his friends enough for giving him the self-respect to hold his head high over the course of two years. Unlike Ariadne who turned it into yet another self-motivator, Parzifal had done his best to isolate his dislike for Pascal and keep it buried. He may not have the compassion to simply forgive, but he would not allow his life to be ruled by dark emotions either. For him to still hold onto that grudge after Pascal had shown the deepest remorse.. Engrossed in his thoughts, Parzifal had unknowingly walked into the great dining hall. "I'm sorry. Parzifal is just getting carried away again. "Oh don't worry about that," the girl reassured. "His headstrong sense of ethics is part of why I love him."

Parzifal kept the banter focused over the course of brunch, discussing mostly the events of last night and the turmoil within the academy that followed. According to Pascal, he had never personally wronged Reynald over the years. Ariadne, however, was a different case entirely. She still wore her angelic smile through all of brunch, still lovingly offered food to Parzifal through raised forks. Just as when Parzifal first walked up to Pascal, a wave of silence rippled outwards through the hall. Within seconds, every moving body stilled as their eyes gazed upon the noble lady facing the Runelord. Kaede was certain Ariadne's glove was glowing. There was simply no way someone could slap that hard without magic, regardless of

how big a sword they twirled around every day. The force of the impact lifted Pascal's feet off the ground and threw him backwards like a rag doll, before the Runelord crashed into the ground several paces away on his back. A red handprint now adorned the right side of his face, his skin rapidly bruising with internal bleeding under the partial cover of his soft golden curls. "Owww," Pascal remarked as he sat back up, his hand rushing to cradle his swelling cheek. A dozen or two people in the hall even clapped and cheered. But for Kaede, it was the first time she ever heard Ariadne use his name. Still sitting on the other side of the table, Kaede tried to smile as she watched the bonding moment that would hopefully, with time, develop into something far more. But all she managed was a wry smirk that seemed more like a grimace. Parzifal leaned over the table to take a look before swiftly pulling back upright. Pascal's confusion returned as he looked between Parzifal and Reynald. The healer kept his silence for the moment, while the knight simply shrugged, clueless. "Kaede, you must be on your cycle.. or whatever your people call a menstrual period.". Thanks to the translation magic integrated into her familiar bond, Kaede herself had no problem understanding Ariadne's terminology. b-but I'm not bleeding," came her voiced thoughts. Even she would recognize the most obvious sign of a feminine body entering 'that time of the month'.

Kaede spent all of Sunday afternoon in bed, feeling almost as sorry for herself as the day she first came to this world. She was certain her hormones were to blame for that, but the knowledge itself didn't raise her mood. Her stomach pains and cramps had not alleviated any since morning, and her one hope of relief had been dashed as soon as it came. Ariadne was quick to point out that there was a spell for mostly suppressing the discomfort during a period. Meaning I can't use the blessing that's the privilege of noble ladies, Kaede reflected irritatingly. I have to suffer like the commoner girls do. It didn't stop Sir 'I-am-a-prodigy' Pascal from trying.. He somehow managed to loosen his own lower controls, which resulted in soiling himself. The last male healer who tried to invent a fix for his commoner wife ended up with a painful, week-long erection. After that, nobody wanted to attempt again. Parzifal also managed to obtain a few rubber hot-water pads, which he enchanted with

Heat spells. There she chose to lay, to apply warm pressure from underneath. "No. It's why I still hate you," she retorted grumpily. "Better late than never. Next time, you try being the one to menstruate!".

Scarlet Cultural Exchange

Kaede spent most of the next two days in bed, skipping even mealtime trips to the dining hall. By Monday afternoon however, her menstrual cramps had lessened enough for her to effectively concentrate on other things. Kaede only missed dinner due to being completely engrossed in her book on Weichsel's history: Today's National Day was actually the 505th year anniversary of Weichsel's founding, declared the night after the Battle of Königsfeld in 61:Faith. In a single decisive engagement, the future King Ferdinand I, the Great, the Crusader, the Saint, etcetera etcetera, crushed the invaders and founded a new realm. It also established Weichsel's tradition of military aristocracy, ever vigilant and periodically tested by raids and invasions from the North Sea. The von Drachenlanzen dynasty still ruled Weichsel today. "You are being invited to dinner, sort of. According to Pascal, Ariadne had mostly put away their past after her epic -- and publicly humiliating -- slap. But not hating his guts wasn't the same as being on good terms. Kaede nodded back and rushed to put on her white 'uniform', a task far simpler than with any of those dresses. She also stuffed her hot water pads into its enchanted belt pouch. Thought you could use a little chat and company after two days," Ariadne's angelic smile radiated from just beyond the room's doorway, with a food tray hovering above one palm and the other hand waving at her. "My friend Cecylia just returned from holiday. Cecylia was slightly taller than Kaede at about one-sixty-four (5'4"), with fine, glossy black hair trimmed short and pull back by a white ribbon. Standing next to the mature and elegant Ariadne, she seemed almost fragile with her petite and thin figure, which only enhanced her undeniably cute appearance. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to stare.". "Hehe, don't worry about it," Cecylia giggled in her schoolgirl soprano. "No, we spoke quite a bit before I fell out with Ariadne, then until today she mostly avoided me. Cecylia Renata von Falkenhausen is the third child of General Wiktor von Falkenhausen, father's second-in-command. "Be careful though. She likes to drag others to her pace before turning it back on them.". But rather than cautionary, Pascal sounded

almost.. The third-year girls' dorms were just one floor above, and Cecylia's room turned out very.. It was bright scarlet, white, and pink, with an abundance of lace and frills. Even before the door closed behind them, Kaede found herself greeted by a plump cat with lush white and gray fur. It laid down before Kaede and gazed at her through teal eyes before giving an adorable purr. "Kaede you might want to finish your dinner before getting too friendly with Ania," Ariadne suggested as she took the tray to the writing desk by the window. "She loves to steal food, and it's hard to keep watch on all of them.". "Ania is a matryoshka cat from Samara," Cecylia watched with an amused grin. Even as Kaede asked, Ania looked up, and another feline face, identical but slightly smaller, emerged from below her furry stomach. The smaller cat soon pulled herself out, laid down next to the larger Ania, and the process repeated itself. "Are they.. separate...?" she struggled to find the right words. "They share the same psyche, as far as we know," Cecylia explained. "Matryoshka cats use shadow magic to make duplicates of themselves to scout for predators and trap prey. "Not since I got annoyed with him and told him to stop. "Good!" Cecylia grinned. "Not that he's the voyeur type, but we don't need him to catch an eye-full during girls' night.". Oh.. Kaede began to fidget just inside the entrance. Before Kaede knew it, Cecylia had finished changing and bounced back. She turned towards Ariadne, her glassy eyes pleading. The noble lady then tilted her head with a 'darn it' look before walking over and pulling the overenthusiastic Cecylia off by the wrist. "At least give Kaede some room before you drive her off. With her shirt open and halfway down her shoulders, Kaede hugged her small chest and pressed herself against the wall. It didn't have quite the intended effect. Kaede merely looked for more inconspicuous objects to fascinate over. She even stopped obsessing over the fact that she wore nothing more than white lingerie as the three of them sat on Cecylia's king-sized four-poster bed between 'nine' furry cats. Although it would take a while before she could grow accustomed to it, if that were possible at all. "Hehe, I do still owe an explanation don't I?" Cecylia replied cheerily. Kaede nearly choked. 'Dhampir' of slavic folklore was the child between a human and... "One of your parents.. is a vampire?" She asked as her coughs subsided with the help of Ariadne stroking her back. "Ah.. you really aren't from our world are you?". Cecylia's scarlet-cross eyes grew fascinated as a mischievous

grin lit up her face. "The vampire clans were wiped out centuries ago by the not-yet-Holy Imperium, although not before their curses destroyed sixteen whole legions and left the Dead Mountains perpetually filled with murderous mist. Dhampir are the descendants of vampires, still carrying the core of the fiendish blood curse that first created them during the Demonic Invasion. "So.. you don't drink blood anymore then?". "We do not urge for blood. Cecylia's grin slanted into a smirk at just the right angle, highlighting the little fang of a canine she sported. But Kaede hardly thought about it as the Dhampir leaned in with a hungry, blood-red gaze. Kaede could feel Cecylia's thin yet firm fingers slide down her bared shoulders, pinning her arms on each side. Hot breaths tickled her exposed collarbone as two deep-red eyes leaned in. "Hehe sorry. You're just too cute that I couldn't resist teasing a teeny bit extra.". "Don't worry though, we only take from the partners we marry," Cecylia announced proudly. So.. Dhampir are dead afraid of STDs. "Although we no longer need it, consuming fresh human blood does make us appear younger. With hands still brushing her long flowing pink tresses, Ariadne had watched the entire exchange with a serene smile, completely unperturbed. Most noble lords have at least one affair during their youth. The Trinitian church may require monogamy, but aristocratic culture always tend to turn a blind eye toward mistresses.". "Well, neither us nor Rhin-Lotharingie completely shrugged off the old pagan traditions of concubines equaling prestige. "Reynald flirts with half of everything female and walking on two legs, plus I prefer someone taller than me," Cecylia almost laughed. Sweet, definitely the romantic type, not to mention that perfect chest the last time he wrestled with Reynald.". "But.. if I court him he'd expect me to become a housewife or something. "Finding the ideal man is overrated. It's far better to help a boy with potential reach his manly peak. Ariadne's calm response sounded more like a profession of wisdom. Kaede took the opportunity to change topics as she ate her last two slices of veal. "She's also a foreign culture expert. I could have sworn her crosses turned into glittering stars when I first told her about you Kaede," Ariadne joked. How often do I get to meet someone from another world?" Cecylia said as she scurried forward playfully until her knees almost touched Kaede's. how similar is your world compared to ours? Other than the no magic part?". Hyperion is like my world if neither the Roman Empire -- who conquered most of the Western

World like your Inner Sea Imperium -- nor its Catholic Church underwent schism. So instead of a long, slow decline, our version of the Imperium collapsed within a few centuries and lead to the Dark Ages." In later hindsight, Kaede was surprised by how easily her words rushed out, even though this was their first meeting. But after being nearly stripped and bitten by Cecylia, delving into deep conversational discussions felt almost.. "Let me start closer to home here and run nation by nation: Weichsel is pretty much Prussia from my old world. "Black powder? That stuff used for mining? We've had it for centuries, just not so much for military use. Kaede furrowed her brows as she grew confused. Even the most conservative of nations didn't take long to realize the potential of gunpowder in Earth history. "Can you imagine infantry carrying that stuff when a Fireball or Lightning strikes? Legion Resistance spells won't save them when the soldiers themselves start exploding from the smallest spark. A single platoon of Knights Phantom, or even Noble Reiters will tear through an entire battle line. It was the first time Kaede truly realized that the existence of magic did more than just replace aspects of technology.

Kaede and Cecylia ended up comparing the cultural and geopolitical evolution of the two worlds late into the night. In the end, it was Ariadne who Kaede apologized to this morning. Ariadne's response this morning had been a truly affectionate "I'm glad you enjoyed yourself. "Hello Parzifal. Clearly, I must have missed something big if the Runelord is sitting next to you.". "The Holy Father does his work in mysterious ways," Parzifal smiled back. "I'm Gerd Kessler. Pleasure to meet you.". Wearing the black-on-burning-red uniform of the Knights Phantom, Gerd stood over meter-eight-five (6'1"). "Ah.. nice to meet you as well.". My parents are yeomen commoners. Parzifal was the one who sponsored my coming here. "Your grades are sixth in our class. "I hate incompetent people," Pascal clarified as his turquoise gaze swept the dining hall. Intellect, resolve, and the skills it bring are what counts.". "In fact, I was just talking to my father the other day about the 'Imperial Examination System' that Kaede spoke of from her memories, which could elevate the poorest civilian to important officials. The performance bottleneck to our army's Mobility Doctrine has always been a limit of capable officers. "Still, better some opportunity than none.. you really must let me contribute to this.". "Earn yourself a noble title, and

you'll have the resources to help others aplenty. Wayyy more efficient, so long as you have the skills for it."

Surrounded by other acquaintances, Parzifal's group broke to separate conversations as they enjoyed their meal. Kaede was introduced to nearly two dozen other noble acquaintances who sat nearby, although none of them spoke another word to her afterwards. She quickly realized that Gerd's situation was milder but somewhat similar to hers, aristocratic sponsorship or not. Unfortunately, Kaede did not receive much of a chance to consult her senior. It soon became apparent that most of the other peers who surrounded Parzifal were not like-minded individuals. Personal politics and alliance-building worked the same way no matter where one went, especially among junior aristocrats. The entire dining hall erupted back into loud, chaotic conversations. Some voices were worried, others anxious, and a few just plain scared. "Okay seriously you're all scaring me. What in Holy Father's name did I miss?"

Outbreak of War

King Leopold von Drachenlanzen of Weichsel had evoked the Writ of Universal Conscription, calling for 'General Mobilization' in the name of the Holy Father. Last but not least, 'General Mobilization' reduced the cycle of officer training from four years to three. The Empire of Rhin-Lotharingie had responded to the military buildup in their south by beginning a partial mobilization five days ago. But spy reports that reached the eyes of the Emperor grossly underestimated both the readiness and the tidal scale of the Caliphate's invasion. Duke Guy of Avro-Calent refused the general retreat order. His proud four-layer concentric castle, which boasted the strongest fortification in Southern Rhin-Lotharingie, was simply bypassed by the Cataliyan vanguard forces. The entire war could not have come at a worse time, just as winter was beginning to seal the Northern Lotharingie Mountains under ice and snow. Even Weichsel's coastal Margraviates found it hard to mobilize as yet another cold front swept in from the North Sea. But the King and his Marshal had no choice. This was the first war against the Empire of Rhin-Lotharingie since signing the defensive military alliance treaty. Papal appeasement was Weichsel's foremost deterrence against southern aggression, especially after hostilities during the War of

Imperial Succession. The Königsfeld Academy of Magic was one of fourteen rallying points within Weichsel. Every day, more forces arrived outside the curtain walls, setting up camps as they awaited fresh orders from above. Companies of swordstaff infantry marched in from nearby villages. Even several hundred cavalry rode in from the nearby counties and baronies who paid direct fealty to the king. By Saturday morning, the entire area surrounding the academy had grown into a new settlement of tents, palisades, 'Instant Cabins', and simple watchtowers.

Kaede lay flat on the ground as she ignored Pascal's scathing remark. Among his kendo friends back on Earth, Kaede's coordination and reflexes had been mediocre at best. At least her period had ended. The first two practice session had far less pleasant results. You should have seen Gerd when he first learned how to ride. That guy was a true sack of potatoes -- makes one appreciate how far he's come.". Parzifal had tried to encourage her every time he came by to see Ariadne, who offered Kaede what pointers she could. Unsurprisingly, the pegasus knight was not only the best rider in her year, but the entire academy as well. The Air Cushion softened the landing enough to prevent injuries, but there was still some impact. Even during the pre-industrial eras of Earth, cavalry was predominantly a noble occupation, for only the wealthy could afford to grow up accustomed to any proper steed. Many farmers had horses and mules as well, but a docile, plow-towing animal was far different from one bred for the military. "No. Dinner is almost upon us, and that was already your fourth try this session. Kaede quickly put her hands away. She wasn't aware it had been that obvious. "Nobody is going to become good in just a few days. Only a prodigy would be foolish enough to expect that, even though your own horsemanship is hardly worth bragging about...". Ariadne voiced her cutting words with a serene smile as she walked over from the wall Parzifal and her had been leaning against. "I was hoping she could act as my courier should the opportunity arise. Thankfully, her own hair was long enough that she stuffed its end into her belt pouch. "Yes; and in most other cases, I would not worry about it," Pascal answered. Smiling as he watched Ariadne from behind, Parzifal strode up to his beloved and put his arm around her shoulders. As though treating a precious jewel, his hands carefully brushed her hair back into place. "Oh right, congratulations are in

order, although it's hardly surprising after your promotion to Captain. 'Reiter' was one of the few military terms Kaede knew from German history -- one of the first cavalry in Europe who raised firearms to the status of primary weapons. The fact her familiar bond's 'translation' feature picked this word in specific meant that the magic actually tried to match Weichsel's language to her specific knowledge. Unlike the professional 'Weichsel Cavalry' which used a combination of polearms, projectiles, and spells, the entirely aristocratic Noble Reiters were cavalrymen who served only as artillery-mages. Their lack of proper combat training reflected in their poor ability to hold out in a close encounter. "Thanks," Pascal answered a bit awkwardly, clearly still not used to this new relationship. "There's not enough new Knights Phantom to form another company, and new medical squads are only formed on a company-basis," Ariadne said dejectedly as she leaned into Parzifal's shoulder. "So they offered me to pick any company from your battalion, since they're short on healers for the medic squads again. What do you think, Captain Sir von Moltewitz? Am I good enough, or do you still think I'm too boring?". "Well, I'll inform the good Major tomorrow then. Not to mention, this also solves our other problem with bringing Kaede.". Both Pascal and Kaede stared at Parzifal for several moments. Neither could figure out the meaning behind his words before the two of them spoke at once:. "Easy," the healer's eyes almost sparkled under his brown bangs. Pascal spoke with a not-serious, not-joyous, not-angry, but oddly peaceful and gentle expression as he handed her a wrapped parchment scroll. He then turned the chair at his work desk around to face her before sitting down on it. Kaede frowned as she took the scroll. Rolling it over, her eyes widened at the black dragon crest of Weichsel on its official wax seal. You are neither a citizen of this country nor a holder of lawfully issued identification. You are not property, but due to the lack of legal precedence, you are not far above it either.". "This.. this is..." her dry voice choked out. "It is an official certification of residency in the Kingdom of Weichsel, personally signed by the Department Chief of Immigration from the Ministry of the Interior. it's been only.. twenty-two days since I came to this world!. Kaede had never applied for citizenship herself, but even she knew that such changes in status usually took years, months at the very least. She had already resigned herself for being completely without rights

and reliant upon his protection for the foreseeable future... "The process normally takes at least two years. But since high government positions are mostly filled by military officers who retired into the reserves, my family has plenty of contacts within the ministries...". Pascal was totally unabashed. To him, using back-doors for personal affairs like this was his right:. "--Some bribery also paved the way, of course. But I saw how shocked you were over this when the headmaster first mentioned it. Kaede felt the wet warmth of tears streak down her cheeks as her glassy eyes continued to gaze upon the scroll. Her fingers were almost shaking as she slowly closed the thick parchment back into a roll. She finally let out the breath she had been unknowingly holding. Yet in hindsight, it wasn't his best present to her. It was easy, so easy to consider this his obligation, as Pascal was the one who tore Kaede away from her past life by summoning her into this world. But she also knew that few individuals placed in such circumstances would have taken the same position or invested the same effort for her sake. Kaede smiled back at Pascal through her blurry gaze. Her hand reached up to wipe away the tears, but even then she had trouble clearly making out his countenance. "--I can't even begin to describe.. this really, really means a lot to me. Throughout her entire life, Kaede almost never lost control of her emotions. A small corner of her mind couldn't help but wonder if being a teenage girl had something to do with it. Thinking back, Kaede had never felt more glad that she picked his side, never so assured that she made the right decision when she joined the assassination scheme against him for his protection. Yet she couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt over her brief indecision. After nearly a minute, Pascal pulled back just enough to look down into her glassy eyes. "As much as I enjoy how huggable you are, we really should go down for dinner. "Then you better help me clean this up first.

"Sir von Moltewitz, please come with me for a moment. "Go join Parzifal and the rest for dinner. I will be there shortly," he told her before following his advisor into the dark hallways of the stone keep. Something about Pascal, about the entire situation just didn't feel right. But at the same time, it didn't do her any good to wait there. The tables were almost full, with as many older nobles as there were younger. Kaede received plenty of odd stares on her way. Some were merely curious, presumably

over where her master was. The senior administration professor that served as the de-facto headmaster of the academy's educational role then turned towards a table and pulled out an open chair near the entrance. But before he would sit down, his gloves reached up and cupped his throat for a split second. Kaede already heard the rumor that the King had offered Professor Sir Albert von Marienfeld a restored generalship and the position of commanding officer over two brigades. Under his commanding presence, the entire dining hall quieted down within seconds. "Before we offer our nightly prayers to the Holy Father, I have two announcements to make. I ask you all to brace yourselves, for neither of them bear pleasant news.". It was an obvious backhanded slap towards the Emperor of Rhin-Lotharingie, who gave the order for a general retreat from the Lotharin-Cataliyan borders. But Professor Albert warned about two pieces of ill news. "Second, I regret to inform you that tragedy has befallen our own Kingdom of Weichsel. "--Commanding Officer of the Weichsel Military Forces and Landgrave of Nordkreuz, plus twenty-eight staff members and bodyguards, were cowardly ambushed by unknown assassins. Reinforcements from Königsfeld did not arrive in time to intercede, and the entire group has been confirmed dead.". This time people didn't even try to stay silent. Some individuals even began shouting matches as their arguments flared... She only waited long enough not to be an embarrassment to Pascal in the eyes of the gathered nobles. He would need his dignity more than ever in the coming days. Only then did she finally remember the telepathy channel. In this kind of situation, its use felt like cheating. She didn't even bother to ask 'are you alright'. There was no way he could be fine after his father's death. Kaede climbed up three more flights of stairs, emerging into the rooftop chill to find Pascal standing in the middle of the gently falling snow. His hardened turquoise gaze did not turn, still watching the far-side battlements and the indigo planet draped over the black horizon. Kaede knew perfectly well why he did not come as promised to the dining hall. Silence returned to the rooftop once more, disrupted only by her quiet footsteps as his statue continued to gaze upon the distant planet. His stilled, half-turned eyes soon reflected the dim light of the heavens as hardened turquoise softened into glass. "--Given what Reynald said about the Mantis Blades, I told him, TOLD HIM, that after their attempt on my head, he was in serious, grave danger as the logical

next target. but when does he EVER listen to me...!?" Kaede stood certain that had Pascal received a similar warning in that same position, he probably would not have altered his habits either. Generals did not succumb to fear over the mere likelihood of danger. Pascal did not cry out when she knocked out two of his teeth and broke three of his ribs on this spot. It wasn't even a matter of masculine pride. The man was born and raised to be a soldier, a commander, a leader. Your father undoubtedly took two of his best bodyguard squads. They must have faced at least several Mantis Blade teams, if not other mercenaries. "But.. he was.. the only family I had left...". She didn't even know what to say. All she did was bury her own tear-stained cheeks into his back and tighten her arms around his chest. She knew his mother had died early. But in hindsight, if Pascal had been raised by servants, then his extended family must have been lacking as well. Her borrowed genealogy references did mention that Pascal's father Karl was also an only son. Pascal and Kaede had a brief discussion over it once. "Father's relationship with mother's side of the family deteriorated after she died. Everyone always expected leaders to be accomplished in everything; to be perfect and superhuman, to flawlessly address every need. After all, there was no point to winning the battle and losing the war. It was his wish to be 'perfect' in his worldly role. But no floor was smooth from the cut of a single tile. Without friends, no leader could stay in the light. It was less than an hour ago when she read her certificate of residency. Still embracing him tightly, Kaede's wispy voice came muffled by the proximity of his uniform jacket. She also thought of his fiancée Sylviane. But having never met the other side of their political betrothal, she couldn't be sure of the princess' intentions. Not to mention that for the first time, she felt.. Kaede paused for a few more seconds as she reviewed her decision. "Even more than that, you have me.. I can't swear I won't dream of my old life and world. Families could still separate, grow apart. But even by the unlikely chance Kaede discovered how to return to her world, they would still be master and familiar, still try to remain part of each others' lives. Hyperion was no longer merely an endless dream or nightmare. Pascal's large hands wrapped around her own, gripping them with firm determination. "Thank you. That is more than I could ever ask for."

Her countenance was serene. Her visage was beautiful, from her long silky hair, to the thinly-curved lashes above caring eyes still tinged with a trace of worry, to her small nose and cute lips... "I once told you that I would never touch you while sleeping without consent, but.. But Kaede didn't say a thing. Shyly pulling the covers up a little further, she returned two small but firm nods. He could almost feel her heartbeat quicken and her cheeks burning as he held her soft body against the firm musculature of his arms and chest. His right hand then reach behind her head, gently stroking her silky long hair as he tried to calm her back down. After his loneliness finally subsided, Pascal couldn't help but feel somewhat guilty for forcing her into it. His mind soon visualized the source -- it was from his fiancée. Farspeak calls had a range and reliability unmatched by conventional Telepathy. It was the one opening that Pascal did not know how to respond to. "I'm on my way to Königsfeld and will arrive by tomorrow morning. Pascal was a fast thinker when he needed to be, but he was still not quick enough. After the news of today, Pascal knew exactly why she was coming to Weichsel.

